Germany, Great Britain and the Rashid Ali al-Kilani Revolt of Spring 1941

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THESIS APPROVAL

The abstract and thesis of James Christian Scott for the Master of Arts degree in History were presented April 24, 1995 and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

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ABSTRACT


Title: Germany, Great Britain and the Rashid Ali al-Kilani Revolt of Spring 1941.

There are few events in the history of humankind which have been more compelling than the Second World War (1939-1945). Unfortunately, most of what transpired during this period of history stands obscured by events such as D-Day, Kursk, and Midway, all happenings which popular history has been more than happy to dwell upon.

This study's intent is to, with the use of primary materials, analyze one of the more "obscured" happenings of the Second World War, the Rashid Ali al-Kilani Revolt of April and May 1941. Central to this work is an assessment of the policy responses of both Great Britain and Germany to the Baghdad-based revolt. It also seeks to answer the following question: why did Great Britain approach the coup with great urgency, while Germany, for the most part, paid it very little attention?

In the case of Great Britain, its traditional power position in the Middle East, and possession of both the Suez Canal and extensive oil stocks, was challenged by Axis activity in north Africa, the Balkans and Crete. The Iraqi coup simply exacerbated the British problem. London's fears were valid and its successful response reflected as much.
For Germany and its leader Adolf Hitler, ideological concerns took precedence over a Middle Eastern campaign. A Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, an event which, by design, would destroy Slavism, Bolshevism, and much of world Jewry, plus gain greater Germany "living space," was primary to Hitler's thinking in the spring of 1941. Furthermore, the Fuehrer's desire for an Anglo-German "understanding" seems to have influenced his attitude in regards to the coup.

Conclusions are also drawn that the policy paths chosen by each European player during the coup were met with dissension. In Great Britain's case, Middle Eastern Commander-in-Chief Archibald Wavell felt that aggressive British action in Iraq might antagonize Arab nationalism. For Germany, Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop was a major advocate of an anti-British strategy and corresponding Nazi activity in Iraq. The Rashid Ali coup represented the last opportunity for Ribbentrop, prior to "Barbarossa," to expose the great vulnerability of the British Empire. From this, proffered is the theory that Ribbentrop, through an exploitation of the Iraq coup, was perhaps attempting to dissuade Hitler from an invasion of the Soviet Union.
GERMANY, GREAT BRITAIN AND
THE RASHID ALI AL-KILANI REVOLT OF SPRING 1941

by
JAMES CHRISTIAN SCOTT

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS
in
HISTORY

Portland State University
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As the fall of 1940 approached, the Nazi war machine was truly on the move. In a mere four-year period, from 1936 to 1940, German aggression had partially or fully occupied Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Denmark, Norway, the Low Countries and France.

The continued freedom of both England and the Soviet Union notwithstanding, Adolf Hitler had clearly become the master of Europe. One had to wonder how far the ambitious tentacles of Nazi expansion were to extend. Would Hitler be content with his string of foreign policy successes in Europe, or would he aim at a proliferation of German influence elsewhere?

In the latter months of 1940, Great Britain stood virtually alone. France had fallen, the Soviet Union was tied into a non-aggression pact with Germany, and America’s isolationist ways kept her aloof from the European war. With the new year approaching, the British found it necessary to consider the possibility of a German invasion. An additional point of concern during those days of crisis dealt with the nation’s overseas possessions. The world-wide scope of the British Empire automatically entailed a good number of responsibilities: the protection of trade routes, lines of communication, raw materials, and within the context of world war, points of strategic interest. Clearly, despite the formidable size of the Royal Navy, both the breadth of Britain’s holdings and the modest size of its army
persisted to keep the Empire, in the early stages of the Second World War, in a position of great vulnerability.

One zone of English influence which appeared especially susceptible to potential problems was the Middle East. The spring of 1941, in the eastern Mediterranean, presented many pressures. Of primary concern to Great Britain were German operations in North Africa and the Balkans. In addition, there were some within leading British circles who believed that the advent of the war, and the many Axis victories which accompanied it, might bring resurrection to the always burdensome factor of Arab nationalism.\(^1\)

The impending Nazi rush on the Middle East, not to mention the Arab national threat, had the potential to turn Great Britain's Middle Eastern position into one of great instability.

The status of the British-dominated Middle East seemed tailor-made for the opportunistic nature of German foreign policy—a simple combination of Nazi scheming with a bit of cooperation from the Arab nationalists could prove a massive foreign policy boon for Germany and a great step for pan-Arabs in their effort to rid the Arab East of the Union Jack. Clearly, as victory for those fighting under the Axis banner continued, and British prestige waned, the chances of such contact occurring increased.

British fears reached their highest point with the Rashid Ali al-Kilani Revolt of April and May 1941. Perhaps the brightest flash-point of Arab dissent during the Second World War, the Iraqi coup d'état represented a great number of things. First, the revolt reflected the attempt by a subjugated

state to break the yoke of foreign domination. Second, it represented the age-old imperialistic rivalry which had existed between European powers. Third, the timing of the coup took place within the context of world-wide conflict, and also at a time when the British Empire's prestige was at its nadir. Fourth, it provided a rare moment in Iraq's history where it was able, through German intriguing, to wield a certain degree of leverage in its dealings with Great Britain. And finally, the coup was a watershed—it clearly defined the extent to which Great Britain was willing to go, not only to save its Empire, but also save itself.

In August 1965, Valentin Berezhkov, interpreter in the Soviet embassy at the time of operation "Barbarossa," the German invasion of Russia, provided a fascinating account of a meeting which took place between German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, and the Soviet Ambassador to Germany Vladimir Dekanozov. During the 22 June 1941 interview, Ribbentrop explained that in view of Soviet provocation, Germany had been forced to launch a preemptive attack. However, according to Berezhkov, just as Soviet officials were leaving the room, the Nazi foreign minister hurried after them in an effort to explain his aversion to "Barbarossa." Berezhkov went on to recount Ribbentrop pleading the following: "Make it known in Moscow that I was against the invasion!"

The Berezhkov recounts provides us with just one of many references to

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3Ibid.
5Ibid.
the apparent skepticism Ribbentrop had for "Barbarossa." This dissension was most prominently manifested in his attempted construction of a series of anti-British, pro-Soviet alliances between 1937 and 1941. The crowning achievement of Ribbentrop's diplomatic crusade was the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939. Ribbentrop reveled in this diplomatic victory—there were few who believed it could be done, and like Prince Otto von Bismarck (1815-1889) and his policy against France seven decades earlier, the foreign minister saw Great Britain's defeat as a mere matter of time.

However, "Barbarossa" precluded all that Ribbentrop had worked so hard to achieve. Hitler's gravitation towards an anti-Soviet stance became more apparent after the winter of 1940/41. And, after the Berghof conference of January 1941, it should have appeared to most high-ranking Nazis, including Ribbentrop, that Hitler was sold on a move against the Soviet Union. If we assume that Ribbentrop as well as other Nazis were opposed to an invasion of the Soviet Union, how might they dissuade Hitler from attempting as much? An analysis of the failed Baghdad coup may help in providing an answer.

The coup, in an far as German foreign policy in 1941 was concerned, should be viewed as significant. It provided an opportunity for those who opposed "Barbarossa" to expose the great vulnerability of British possessions in the Middle East, and in doing so provide an alternative strategy. In attempting to understand Germany's conduct during the coup, it is vital to analyze the varied attitudes within the German government regarding their relation to the future of German foreign policy. Accordingly, the revolt can be viewed as a crossroads, where German foreign policy, under the endorsement of Hitler, opted for a distinctly anti-Soviet stance as opposed to
that advocated by Ribbentrop and others.

In view of this, one must consider a few crucial questions. First, how could this area have meant so much to the British and, at the same time, so little to Adolf Hitler? Furthermore, one might wonder, after considering Hitler's disinterest in the coup, what the revolt represented to those in the German government who supported its full exploitation? For example, was it an instance much like the Rashid Ali coup which Ribbentrop had in mind when he, on 7 March, ordered the Foreign Ministry to develop greater activity in Arab lands and to pay close attention to the question of "how this problem [was] to be handled with reference to [Germany's] aim of achieving England's defeat"? And finally, how plausible is it that the Rashid Ali Revolt could have played a sizable role in altering the course of the global war? In addressing such issues, this study will endeavor to analyze as well as criticize the foreign policy paths chosen by both Great Britain and Germany during the revolt.

The coup will not serve as this work's focal point. Rather, the primary purpose of the revolt should be likened to a prism--its initiation created a dispersion of events which reflected the policy attitude of the events' primary players. Acting as a "prism of history," the coup exposed both the weaknesses and strengths of the foreign policy goals of Great Britain, Germany, and, less importantly, of Italy and the Arab world.

To address the post-coup responses of these states adequately, it is vital to consider a certain degree of background material. It would be haphazard to try to present and analyze the events of April and May of 1941 without

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6Documents on German Foreign Policy, (London-Washington, 1950-1964), series D, vol. XII, no. 133. Henceforth known as D.G.F.P.
placing them within their proper historical context. Accordingly then, the
next chapter will attempt to elucidate the fundamentals of Arab nationalism
in Iraq and the Middle East, and its ties to Great Britain, Germany, and, of
course, the coup.
The Rashid Ali Revolt was, by no means, a spontaneous act committed by a group of power-hungry politicians. Rather, it was initiated by a cell of men whose intentions were both deep-seated and profound. Basically, the coup served as a sort of boiling point where the age-old frustrations of a great number of individuals converged. The primary component of the conspirators' actions was the phenomenon of Arab nationalism. In order to understand the Arab nationalist movement, especially its relation to the Rashid Ali coup, it is necessary to recount and analyze its history. Furthermore, in order to view Arab nationalism and its role in the coup properly, it is crucial to consider the parallel development of German and British policy agendas in the Arab East from the First World War onward.

As did other nationalisms, Arab nationalism aimed at independence from foreign control. It also possessed a pan-Arab dimension which called for the ultimate union of all Arab peoples into a single, independent state comprised of Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Arabia. A ready and most relevant parallel to the pan-Arab cause was Hitler's attempt to bring all ethnic Germans or

7Geoffrey Warner, Iraq and Syria, 1941 (Newark, Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 1974), 11.
Volksdeutsche under the umbrella of one greater German state. In theory, as the Hungarian German stood on par with the Bavarian, so too did the Yemeni stand in union with the Syrian. As will be seen, this very commonality would prove a major factor in the development of relations between the leadership corps of the Arab world and its Teutonic associates in the latter 1930's.

The origins of modern Arab nationalism can be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century. Most of the movement's ire, at that time, was directed against the Ottoman Empire, the overlord of the Arab world. With the advent of the First World War, Turkey cast its lot with Germany and the Central Powers. As a result, Great Britain and its Entente allies sought to foment Arab revolt against the Ottomans. In return for Arab assistance, the British government promised to realize the dearest of all pan-Arab aspirations—the creation of an independent, unified Arab state. However, as the policy aims of their Turkish allies and the pan-Arabs were incongruent, any German hope of attaining collaboration with the Arabs was hindered by its alliance with the Ottoman Empire.

The extent of Britain's assurances, prior to the initiation of the Arab revolt in June 1916, were found in a vague series of letters to an Arab leader, Sharif Husayn, from the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon. Although the gist of the missives reflected London's willingness to meet Arab demands for independence, McMahon was careful to include a number of conditions. The most significant related to the French

10Warner, 11.
government's desire to hold a certain degree of influence in the Levant. In consideration of their ally, the British deliberately excluded the coastal strip of Syria from their promises to Husayn.11 As the Arab leader found the French demand repugnant, the issue was tabled until after the war.12 Therefore, in the summer of 1916, Arab rebels found themselves wary of two things as they prepared to act: first, how reliable were McMahon's assurances for independence, and second, how likely was the possibility of a renewed foreign presence in the Middle East.

In the spring of 1916, and unknown to Arab nationalists, Great Britain, France, and Russia concluded the notorious Sykes-Picot Treaty. The agreement called for the partitioning of the Asian sections of the old Ottoman Empire into zones of influence. Generally speaking, the treaty assigned to France, Britain, and Russia, respectively, the areas of Syria, Mesopotamia, and Turkish Armenia.13 Palestine was to fall under international control.14 The division of zones, excluding that of the newly created Soviet Union, was given finality with the April 1920 San Remo Conference.15 This meeting established that under the supervision of the League of Nations, France should be granted mandatory control over Syria while Great Britain would hold the like over Iraq and Palestine.16

12Ibid., 343.
13Hirszowicz, 7.
14Ibid.
15Ibid., 6.
16Ibid., 7.
The policy concerns of France and Great Britain were more than adequately accommodated by San Remo. Gaining Palestine enabled Great Britain to extend its influence onto both banks of the Suez Canal, while Iraq guaranteed oil concessions and an overland bridge for transit between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. France, for her part, gained undivided control over the whole of Syria. Its occupation of the Levant signaled the abolishment, in July 1920, of the Arab government at Damascus. The Damascus government, set up in October 1918, under the leadership of Husayn's son, Faysal, was what little London and Paris would offer the Arabs in the form of a post-war concession. Needless to say, the conclusion of the Entente agreements proved a stinging disappointment for the Arabs.

As far as Germany was concerned, the Versailles Treaty of 1919 put an end to its activities in the Middle East. It compelled the German government to cede "overseas possessions and special rights in dependent countries such as Egypt." Berlin also lost properties in the Ottoman Empire. Furthermore, the domestic problems which besieged Germany after the war forced the new Weimar government to look almost exclusively inward. Not for another fifteen years would Germany reappear in the Arab East.

The Balfour Declaration widened the Anglo-Arab rift in November 1917. The document essentially promised British aid in the establishment of a national Jewish homeland in Palestine. The convenience for Great Britain in following such a policy dwelled in the notion that not only was it able to

17Ibid., 6.
18Ibid.
secure moral sanction for its occupation of Palestine, but it also won substantial kudos in the eyes of world Jewry.\textsuperscript{20} Coming as no surprise, the Arab majority in Palestine jibbed at the idea of Jewish settlement. The resulting tensions between Arab and Jew festered for the next two decades. And the Palestinian situation would only find itself exacerbated by the exodus of Jews from Germany after the ascension to power of the anti-Semitic Nazi regime in 1933 (between 1933 and 1936, the Jewish population in Palestine grew from 192,000 to 355,000).\textsuperscript{21}

In reaction to the Jewish influx, Arab discontent was quickly transformed into armed rebellion in 1936.\textsuperscript{22} Great Britain responded to the region's instability by forming a fact-finding commission, which concluded that Palestine be partitioned into spheres of influence.\textsuperscript{23} However, as fiery heads prevailed, neither the Jewish nor the Arab camp could find satisfaction in the commission's resolution, each side believing itself entitled to the whole of Palestine. In an effort to allay Arab fears of continued Jewish immigration, London, in 1939, issued a White Paper which essentially placed a quota on the number of Jews allowed into Palestine.\textsuperscript{24} But, as the Arabs still remained dissatisfied with the British decision, it was becoming more evident that London's hold on the Middle East was loosening.

Surfacing as one of the most crucial figures in the Arab nationalist movement in Palestine was Haj Amin al-Husayni, the Grand Mufti of

\textsuperscript{20}Hirszowicz, 7-8.
\textsuperscript{21}Wasserstein, 11.
\textsuperscript{22}Ibid., 12.
\textsuperscript{23}Ibid., 12-13.
\textsuperscript{24}Ibid., 19-22.
Jerusalem. As the head of the Arab High Committee, a nationalist organization, the Mufti was viewed by pan-Arabs as the tacit leader of their movement. Exiled from Palestine for his hand in Arab dissent, the Mufti arrived in Baghdad on 16 October 1939. His move to Baghdad opened a new chapter in the development of pan-Arabsim in Iraq—it provided leadership and inspiration to an ultra-nationalist mentality which had been incubating in Iraq for the last two decades.

From as early as its establishment in 1920, it was clear that Iraq would be profoundly affected by the European agreements. As a country under mandate from the League of Nations, Iraq found its leadership coming from two alien entities: the British government, and Faysal Husayn, the son of Sharif and leader of the deposed Damascus government. The British government was "alien" for obvious reasons: to many Arabs, Great Britain's status as a foreign power asserting its mandate was no different from years of Ottoman rule. England's first act of state was the imposition of Faysal as the ruler of Iraq. Upon arriving in Iraq in 1921, "accompanied by British officials, he was a stranger to the country and his social base of support was narrow." Entering a highly heterogeneous society, Faysal had to pull his support from a patch-work of religious, tribal, ethnic, and, above all, familial loyalties. The new king had the unenviable task of integrating this plurality of allegiances into the alien notion of national territorial integrity.

27Ibid., 8.
Husayni attitude of the new government's many dissidents manifested itself in a revolt, in 1921, which spread throughout the tribal areas of the Euphrates and the regions north and east of Baghdad. As a result, Great Britain lost four hundred of its nationals, forty million pounds, and a great deal of confidence in its ability to fulfill the Iraqi mandate.

The rebellion prompted London to install a system of indirect rule. The new mode of governance, in Iraq, was established on the British model—it came complete with parliament, political parties, and cabinet. Great Britain maintained influence over Iraqi policy-making by assuring that its own advisors sat in all the ministries. Such would be the case for the next eleven years, at which time, in 1932, Iraq became the first modern Arab state to obtain independence.

It is important to mention, however, that after the termination of the Iraqi mandate, Great Britain still retained a significant presence in the state's affairs. The extent of British influence in 1932 matched the provisions of the 1930 Anglo-Iraqi Treaty. The agreement provided for a close alliance between the two states. A number of privileges given to Great Britain included the following: air bases at Habbaniya and Shaiba and the right to use the ports, airfields, and railways of Iraq. With these advantages in hand, Great Britain was able to exert sizable influence over the country's economic and political

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29 Ibid.
31 Simon, 57.
32 Hirszowicz, 8.
After its release from mandate status, the Iraqi state had seemingly come of age. Despite evident vestiges of British control, Iraq stood as a model for the many states within the Arab world which aspired to one day gain independence and serve as an active participant in the world community. However, in 1936, Iraq became the first Arab state to experience a coup d'état. The 1936 Bakr Sidqi coup holds significance for two reasons. First, the event introduced the highly nationalistic Iraqi military as a prime player in the formulation of state policy-making, a position that it held until 1941. And second, along with the military’s ascension came the subsequent reappearance of Germany as a primary figure in the development of Middle Eastern affairs. Much of this German reemergence can be attributed to the great admiration which Iraqi ultra-nationalists, primarily those in the army, had for the German nation and its National Socialist ideals.33

One may look at the 1936 coup as a political ground-breaking of sorts for the Iraqi military as the event made it, in the words of Majid Khadduri, “virtually the sole deciding factor in the rise and fall of almost all Cabinets from 1937 and 1941.”34 As the army rose, its political doctrine followed in accordance. The military was extremely nationalistic and was comprised of officers who believed that a strong army-led regime in Iraq was imperative if the country was to exorcise foreign control, unite all Arabs, bring aid to fellow Arab states in the fight against imperialism, and provide a strong sense of law

34Khadduri, 124.
and order in the country. The military’s leading clique was known as the “Golden Square,” and was comprised of Colonels Salah ad-Din as Sabbagh, Kamil Shabib, Mahmud Salman, and Fahmi Sa’id. Under the “Golden Square’s” leadership, the army was able to galvanize its strong influence on the Baghdad government through its close relationship with various civilian officials, the most significant being Rashid Ali al-Kilani. Al-Kilani was unmistakably anti-British and a founding member of the Ikha al-Watani party which came to prominence with its opposition to the previously mentioned 1930 Treaty of Alliance. However, Iraq’s extremists did face opposition from a more moderate group of nationalist politicians. Led by the Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Sa’id, this cell, as Khadduri states, “was favorably disposed towards Great Britain and foresaw grave danger to the Arab world from identification of Arab nationalism with totalitarian ideologies.” Nuri essentially believed that the only sensible way of gaining a pan-Arab union was through patience and compromise with Great Britain and France. Furthermore, he saw any alliance with Germany as a fast and sure way of alienating Great Britain and destroying progress already made. But, as things stood in 1937, the military had, quite evidently, entrenched itself as the predominant force in Iraqi politics.

How can one explain the presence of a pro-British prime minister in a government dominated by a pro-German military? Nuri’s rise to prime minister had been sanctioned by the four colonels because of a mutual dislike

36 Ibid., 95.
37 Khadduri, 163.
both camps had for the deposed Jamil Midfa’i regime (1937-1938).\footnote{Eliezar Be’eri, \textit{Army Officers in Arab Politics and Society} (London: Pall Mall, 1969), 25.}
Furthermore, it may also have been the case that when the military chose to champion Nuri’s rise in December 1938, it did not realize the true extent of the candidate’s pro-British convictions. In the following pages, further light will be brought to the estrangement of Nuri and the military.

The Iraqi military’s ascent followed in conjunction with events which were taking place in Europe. One such occurrence was the appointment of Adolf Hitler as Chancellor of Germany. Based on an amalgam of historical, cultural, and racial awareness, the new government sought to restore the greatness which Germany had known prior to Versailles. It has been stated earlier that the Nazi regime endeavored to bring about the union of all ethnic Germans. Accordingly, by 1939, Germany had made great strides in doing such--Austria and the Sudetenland had both become part of Hitler’s greater German Reich.

Aptly enough, the Nazi state’s ability to achieve its ethnic union effectively drew the admiration of many Arab nationalists, particularly those in Iraq.\footnote{Reeva S. Simon, “The Teaching of History in Iraq Before the Rashid Ali Coup of 1941,” \textit{Middle Eastern Studies} 22, no. 1 (January 1986): 43.} Germany’s accomplishments excited the Iraqis, who looked upon themselves and the Germans as two peoples who shared similar historical experiences. In order to better understand Iraq’s strong interest in the Nazi German rise, one must analyze the relationship which existed between Germany and the Ottoman Empire prior to and during the First World War.

At the turn of the century, Wilhelmine Germany looked upon the flaccid
Ottoman Empire as an entity prime for colonization as well as economic exploitation. The Germans also viewed the Empire as a vehicle which might enable them to compete with British and French interests in the region. In order to achieve these policy goals, Germany sought to inculcate Turkish political and military officials with the benefits of "cultural nationalism." Surfacing with the rise of German Romanticism at the beginning of the nineteenth century, this school of thought emphasized the glories, past and present, of a people’s language and history. In essence, the Wilhelmine government sought to utilize "cultural propaganda" as a means of assimilating Turkey’s educated military and civilian elite to the ways of Imperial Germany, and, as a result, galvanize Turko-German ties.

The Wilhelmine government’s policy had indeed affected a wide portion of Turkish society. However, it is important to mention that just as ethnic Turks were digesting the ideal of "cultural nationalism,” so too were many ethnic Arabs within the Ottoman military and government. Arabs were becoming increasingly wary of the Ottoman government’s Turkification of the Empire. In view of this growing Turkish cultural influence, Arabs looked to their own cultural past by reading books which spoke of heroes and the Arab conquest of Spain. Furthermore, those Arabs who were most affected by German policy, the military, surfaced as the movement’s vanguard and helped perpetuate various secret societies which sought to spread Arab

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41Ibid., 10-11.
42Ibid., 20-21.
identity and culture. In essence, a new form of nationalism was developing from the pattern which had been handed to the Turks by the Germans.

Aptly enough, after the creation of the kingdom of Iraq, many of the Arabs who had been educated by the Germans in the Ottoman Empire carried this sense of “cultural nationalism” southward. Especially after receiving its independence in 1932, Iraq was quick to develop as a hot-bed of Arab nationalism. With Syria and Palestine still under foreign control, it was natural for Arab nationalist leaders to turn to Iraq. Truly, as it soon became vaunted as the Prussia of the Arab East, many Arabs looked to Iraq as the most promising country to achieve the pan-Arab union.

Iraq’s fervent nationalist and pro-German sentiments did not elude the watchful eye of Berlin as the new German regime began to realize the importance of attaining an Arab-German rapprochement. In an effort to fan the Arab fire, the German government, as early as 1932, initiated propaganda activities in the Arab East. In that same year, the head of the Hitler youth, Baldur von Schirach, made a visit to Baghdad. Nazi propaganda found an echo in the rise of paramilitary organizations such as Iraq’s Futuwwa, a group which was designed with the specific intent of bringing the nationalist ideal to the country’s youth.

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44 Be’eri, 286-289.
45 Khadduri, 162.
46 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Hirszowicz, 18.
Germany’s most effective agent in the Middle Eastern propaganda war was its minister to Iraq, Dr. Fritz Grobba. Schooled in Arab culture and history and fluent in Arabic and Turkish, Grobba was no stranger to Middle Eastern affairs. He harbored much faith in the great potential of the pan-Arab movement. In late 1937, he believed that “the friendship of the Arabs for Germany [was] almost instinctual.” Grobba also felt that “the friendship of the Arabs for Germany [was] still active in the leading class in Iraq, Syria, and Palestine . . .” Grobba expressed his own views on the future of German policy in the Arab East by stating that “Even if Arab friendship towards Germany is determined above all by the Arabs’ own interest, it is an important factor for Germany, which we can make both political and economic use of.” Quite clearly, it was not just those within the pan-Arab camp who saw promise in German-Iraqi collaboration.

During the inter-war period, pro-German, nationalistic sentiment could be found both within the Iraqi military and government. And, as addressed, this ideology was to become especially poignant after the army’s rise to power in 1936. These attitudes, coupled with the lingering sting of the wartime and post-war European agreements, made Iraq a country hostile to British interests while, at the same time, standing wide-open to those of Germany. With the Mufti’s move to Iraq in April 1939, the pan-Arab movement quickly surfaced as a significant threat to Great Britain’s Middle Eastern status quo. General Sabbagh of the “Golden Square” expressed his pre-coup Anglophobia by stating the following:

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50Nicosia, 208.
There is no more murderous wolf for the Arabs and no deadlier foe of Islam than Great Britain. As for the Arabs, they have been torn apart into small countries, communities and tribes that fight each other. Three hundred and fifty million Muslims are still groaning under the yoke of British imperialism. The bloody ‘Lion Heart’ of the Crusaders’ wars was British and so was Allenby, who conquered Jerusalem and said, ‘Now the Crusades are over.’ If you give some attention to the location of countries and continents, and if you understand the strategic significance of the British wars, you will then see that the Arabs have no future unless the British Empire comes to an end.52

Clearly, the Iraqi situation, on the eve of the war, was prime for revolt—Sabbagh’s words were truly representative of many within the Iraqi government.53 However, despite such pervading sentiment, there were several factors which the prospective conspirators faced. First, the steady Nuri Sa’id was wise to the intent of many of the ultra-nationalists within the government and endeavored to forestall any move to revolt by the extremists. Second, the Iraqi government was still bound by the 1930 Treaty of Alliance to Great Britain. Any breach of this treaty could signal a quick and resounding response from the British, who persisted, despite their tenuous stance in the Arab East, to be the region’s dominant military force. And thirdly, Germany was far away from Iraq—in 1939, Hitler’s mind was set on attaining European hegemony, and a distance of fifteen hundred miles, in the meantime, kept German involvement in Iraq at a minimum. By no means would the success of a nationalist coup be a certainty.

It was against this backdrop that the Rashid Ali al-Kilani revolt took place—the Arab nationalist movement had found a home in Iraq, leadership in the Mufti, the military and Rashid Ali, an enemy in Great Britain, and in its eyes,

52Be’eri, 372.
53Ibid.
an ally in Nazi Germany. Needless to say, by the fall of 1939, the smell of revolution permeated the Baghdad air. In the next chapter the events which made up the coup will be recounted in brief.
CHAPTER III

THE COUP

On 1 September 1939, Hitler's Wehrmacht invaded Poland. Two days later, on 3 September, Great Britain and France declared war on Germany. The Second World War was effectively sent into motion. In a war which appeared to be on its way to having global ramifications, it was vital for states, when opting for a side, to do so prudently. Morality, opportunity, and security of neutrality, all proved factors which influenced the considerations of each member of the global community. And, in the case of Iraq, the issue of "choosing sides" proved an arduous business.

At the outset of the war, Iraq was ruled by a regent, the Amir Abd al-Ilah, and a government headed by the pro-British Nuri Sa'id.\textsuperscript{54} As emphasized, however, Nuri's cabinet was replete with Anglophobes and was dependent upon the support of the army which, ever since the Bakr Sidqi coup of 1936, had served as the decisive force in Iraqi politics. As war between Great Britain and Germany appeared a certainty, Nuri was partial to a declaration of war on the latter. But the more extreme elements of the government favored the extraction of concessions in respect to Syria and Palestine as a price for doing so.\textsuperscript{55} In any case, without issuing a declaration of war, Iraq, on 5 September, severed diplomatic relations with Germany. By opting for the "middle course" and not declaring war on Germany, one crucial fact about the Iraqi

\textsuperscript{54} Warner, 35.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 36.
government was revealed—two camps were vying over opposed policy agendas, and until one could gain preponderance, Iraqi policy, in respect to the war, would remain ambiguous.

By the spring of 1940, Nuri began to sense his grasp on the course of Iraqi policy loosening. After proposing a series of reforms dealing with the electoral laws and with reform and settlement of land disputes in the Diwaniya area, the prime minister was met with dissent from within the government. Much of the government's criticism of Nuri could be attributed to the influential intrigues of the "Golden Square." Vexed by Nuri's close relationship with London, the four colonels saw great promise in their promotion of Rashid Ali as a replacement to the current prime minister. By March, Nuri was enveloped by opposition, from both those in the anti-British camp and those within his own group who frowned upon him for not taking a more assertive role against the "Golden Square." As a result, on 31 March, Nuri resigned in favor of Rashid Ali, with the provision, however, that the former prime minister be allowed to take on the position of foreign minister. In assuming such a post, Nuri hoped to continue to influence the maintenance of a Iraqi policy of cooperation towards Great Britain.

The changing of ruling parties did not bode well for Great Britain. As things stood, in the summer of 1940, Rashid Ali neither allowed the concentration of British troops in Iraq nor severed diplomatic ties with

56 Penrose, 95.
57 Ibid., 91.
58 Ibid., 95.
59 Khadduri, 162.
Germany's Axis partner, Italy. Making matters worse were the swirling rumors that the Iraqi government was in the process of renewing diplomatic relations with Germany. Upon hearing such news, London's Ambassador to Iraq, Sir Basil Newton, asserted that if Iraq was to resume relations with Germany, Great Britain would, in turn, be compelled to reconsider her relations with Iraq.60 Newton further conceded that London had no confidence in Rashid Ali. Such a barb simply brought aggravation to an already shaky relationship existing between the two governments. And when, on 9 January, the Iraqi government solicited Great Britain for weapons and money, the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Sir Anthony Eden, bit back by stating that London only supplied pounds to "loyal allies."61 Later that month, and without surprise, the British government insisted that Rashid Ali be removed from his post as prime minister.

Great Britain's request induced the regent to intervene and use his influence in an effort to force the prime minister to resign.62 Fortunately for Abd al-Ilah, certain variables were making his task easier to complete. First, the news of British military success in the western desert of Egypt helped dull the edge of pro-Axis sentiment in the Baghdad government. Second, economic sanctions were having a draining effect on the whole of Iraq. And finally, Rashid Ali harbored a deep fear of the threat of civil war which appeared to be on the verge of erupting between the country's pro and anti-British camps.63 Ultimately, the prime minister tendered his resignation via

60 Ibid., 201.
61 Ibid., 196.
62 Ibid., 201.
63 Ibid., 204.
The newly formed government came under the leadership of general Taha al-Hashimi. The rationale for Taha’s selection rested upon the fact that both the regent and the more extreme elements of the government, especially the “Golden Square,” respected the general and had much faith in his ability to rule fairly. Aptly enough, the new prime minister’s central task was to bring reconciliation to the tensions which had been lingering between the pro-Axis clique and the regent. Taha also endeavored to persuade the “Golden Square” to accept a policy of conciliation towards Great Britain. However, on 28 February, 1941, at a meeting which consisted of the Mufti, Rashid Ali, and three members of the “Golden Square,” the policy of the Taha government was reviewed. Those in attendance came to two conclusions: first, it was decided that breaking-off relations with Italy was inconsistent with Arab interests; and second, if Taha were to insist on carrying out a policy unacceptable to the nation, he should then be asked to resign in favor of Rashid Ali.

In essence, with the meeting’s adjournment, the fate of the Taha government was sealed. The conspirators decided to act on 1 April by first alerting the army. Taha was then handed an ultimatum which proposed collaboration between himself and the pro-Axis group. After Taha refused the extremist demand, the regent’s palace was surrounded. Although the regent was able to escape, the coup had succeeded, and for the meantime the conspirators had effectively gained control of the government. Clearly, the game was afoot—Iraq was under a state of revolt, and all attention would now

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64 Hirszowitz, 135.
65 Ibid.
be focused on what sort of policy measures Great Britain, Germany, and Italy would apply to the Baghdad crisis.
CHAPTER IV

BRITISH OPERATIONS IN IRAQ

After viewing the military character of the British campaign in Iraq, one will generally recognize that it was one of exceptional quality—under great strain, the British government quickly turned impending disaster into satisfying victory. However, beneath its exterior of thwarted sieges and called bluffs, one will also find that the British expedition was plagued and, it would be safe to say, driven by the geopolitical fears and biases of the many high-level officials which were involved in the quickly developing art of Middle Eastern “trouble shooting.”66 In essence, the British expedition could easily be characterized as one which held a certain duality—in no way did the formulation of the British policy match the flawless nature of the campaign itself. And although those involved were able to win the day, the process which eventually yielded a British victory was, by no means, one reflecting unanimity.

The strategic and tactical control of the Iraqi operation fell under the influence of three primary command centers: London, Cairo, and Delhi. From the outset of the crisis, it became evident that each camp was going to advocate the policy which best accommodated its own regional agenda. By virtue of this, two schools of thought quickly developed. Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and East Indian Commander-in-Chief Sir Claude

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66Kedourie, Arabic Political Memoirs and other Studies, 276-280.
Auchinleck, favored armed intervention, while others, like Middle Eastern
Commander-in-Chief Archibald Wavell, and the British Ambassador to Iraq,
Sir Kinahan Cornwallis, both well attuned to the potentialities of Arab
nationalism, saw armed intervention as risky and provocative. They
believed that diplomacy and conciliation were the soundest roads to take. In
addition to considering the campaign’s divisive nature, this chapter will
strive to recount the events good and bad, which comprised the British phase
of the Iraqi dilemma.

The Iraqi coup could not have come at a more inopportune time for Great
Britain—the Afrika Korp’s counter-offensive in North Africa, the German
drive into Yugoslavia and Greece, the impending Nazi assault on Crete, and
the Baghdad coup were all unfolding nearly simultaneously. The British
Empire was in the process of experiencing one of its darkest hours in the
spring of 1941. Certainly the last thing that the British needed in the eastern
Mediterranean was an additional problem added to those which already
existed. As this was the case, Churchill found himself compelled to, as he put
it, “make sure” of Iraq.67

Churchill’s first move was to secure the Iraqi port city of Basra by armed
intervention. Basra served as a vital link in the passage of communications
through the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean. Although Churchill
intended to give the Baghdad government the impression that the troops
were in transit to Palestine, he was clearly intent on the simple goal of
securing Basra. In an effort to do so, Churchill, on 8 April 1941, sent the
following dispatch to the Secretary of State for India, L.S. Amery:

Some time ago you suggested that you might be able to spare another division taken from the frontier troops for the Middle East. The situation in Iraq has turned sour. We must make sure of Basra, as the Americans are increasingly keen on a great air assembling base being formed there to which they could deliver direct. This plan seems of high importance in view of the undoubted Eastern trend of the war. I am telling the Chiefs of Staff that you will look into these possibilities. General Auchinleck also had ideas that an additional force could be spared.68

Upon receiving the Churchill missive, Amery conveyed it to Auchinleck, who promptly offered to divert to Basra an infantry brigade and a regiment of artillery originally intended for Malaya.69 Auchinleck also saw fit to secure the transfer of 400 infantrymen from India to the British enclave at Shaiba.70 However, on 10 April, Rashid Ali stated that the coup d'état was merely a matter of internal politics and nothing that should preclude Great Britain from exercising her rights of passage under the Treaty of Alliance. Ambassador Cornwallis found the Iraqi government's conciliatory stance encouraging, and expressed, in a 11 April telegram, that a landing at Basra might be viewed by Baghdad as a blatant act of provocation.71 Lord Linlithgow, Viceroy of India, spoke in defense of the landings by stating the following:

But we are moving into a position that affects our general standing in the Middle East, that has the most important potential repercussions on India and Iran, that affects our oil supplies (so vital to the admiralty) in Iran and Bahrein (and to a lesser extent Kuwait); and I have no doubt that we must be prepared to take a strong line now.72

The India Command's sound advice was heeded and, on 18 April, the

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68Ibid.
69Ibid.
70Warner, 93.
71Kedourie, Arabic Memoirs and other Studies, 279.
72Ibid.
brigade group was able to disembark at Basra without opposition. Churchill, then, after receiving word of the mission's safe arrival, requested the diversion of two or more other brigades, also headed for Malaya.\textsuperscript{73} The factors that inspired the Rashid Ali camp to maintain its calm can be conjectured. Although it is difficult to provide definite reasons for his stance, one can assume that Rashid Ali viewed strong cooperation with treaty demands as an open door to possible British recognition of the outlaw government, and it is perhaps more probable, that the premier was expecting Axis aid.\textsuperscript{74}

As it became clear that London was deadly serious about its treaty rights and that Axis aid, in the meantime, would be on hold, the coup government's attitude quickly changed. Upon learning the 30 April landing date of the Indian troops, Rashid Ali said that he "could not give permission for any fresh landings until troops already at Basra had passed through the port."\textsuperscript{75} His specific demands were as follows: first, that the troops proceed as rapidly as possible to Rutba; second, that the British government announce well in advance any intention to ship more detachments; and three, the total number of British troops should not exceed, at any one time, the strength of one mixed brigade.\textsuperscript{76} The Iraqi government further stated that the British government, by its effort to establish a base at Basra, was in violation of an amendment to the treaty, made unilaterally by Baghdad on 16 July 1940, which stated "that bases should not be established or troops stationed in

\textsuperscript{73}Churchill, 254.
\textsuperscript{74}Khadduri, 219.
\textsuperscript{75}Churchill, 255.
\textsuperscript{76}Khadduri, 219.
Iraq.” In essence, the Iraqis believed that they alone were responsible for the defense of lines of communication. However, on 28 April, Cornwallis, albeit with reticence, replied that the treaty did not contain the limitations which the Iraqi government had suggested. So, in accord with the prime minister’s aggressive stance, the landings went forward and pressed into action the ill-prepared Iraqis.

The conspirators placed the bulk of their military strength around the Royal Air Force base at Habbaniya. Habbaniya is located roughly fifty miles west of Baghdad and is connected to the capital city by a desert highway which crosses the Euphrates near the town of Falluja. The Iraqis had the great fortune of occupying a series of strategically advantageous uplands overlooking the British base. The rebel siege force was comprised of two infantry brigades, along with artillery and armor. Not intended to be anything more than an air force training base, the cantonment, commanded by Air Vice Marshal Smart, held just over 2,200 military personnel, and no fewer than 9,000 civilians. The air strength of the base was limited. However, thanks to the arrival of a few Gladiator fighters from Egypt, plus the base’s own assortment of eighty-two training aircraft, Smart was able to patch-together a functional force of four squadrons. Early on the morning of 30 April, an Iraqi officer presented a message from his commander

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77 George Kirk, The Middle East and the War (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 68.
78 Ibid., 74.
79 Churchill, 255. Accounting for the large number of civilians at Habbaniya was the use of the cantonment in the protection of British nationals.
80 Ibid.
demanding that all flights cease and that no one should leave the base. It soon became clear to Smart that time was of the essence. His sole material advantage rested in air power, which would only be effective during daylight hours. Furthermore, the Iraqi occupation of vital bridges over the Tigris and Euphrates meant that the base was cut off by all access but the air. And finally, it could have occurred to Smart that, with time, the Iraqi forces would only get stronger and more confident. Smart clearly had several reasons for wanting to fire the first shot.

The air officer commanding "... decided that it was essential to attack these troops without further warning. Accordingly, in the early morning of 2 May an improvised air force ... attacked the Iraqi forces." Taking part in the raid were air elements from both Habbaniya and Shaiba. In total, the R.A.F. was able to make 193 sorties, and it soon became evident that Iraqi guns were much less daunting than originally thought. As Smart believed that a unified attack on the camp was unlikely, he saw fit to initiate further air missions against the Iraqi Air Force as well as the line of communications between Habbaniya and Baghdad. Over the next three days, the R.A.F. enjoyed comfortable air superiority throughout Iraq, and was even able to run

82 Ibid., 182.
83 Ibid.
84 Ibid., 183.
85 Kirk, 70.
86 Playfair, 183.
a sortie towards Iraqi military installations at Mosul. During the night of 5 May, patrols of the King’s Own Royal Regiment raided Iraqi positions on the Habbaniya plateau. At dawn on 6 May it was found that the Iraqis had abandoned their positions. With this, the siege was raised. Smart, for his efforts, received a note of appreciation and congratulation from the prime minister: “Your vigorous and splendid action has largely restored the situation.” 87

Meanwhile, on 2 May, while the defenders of Habbaniya were fighting for their lives, the Chiefs of Staff in London were in the process of gathering a relief column for the besieged base. Any thought of considering the Basra enclave a candidate for relieving Habbaniya was precluded by the fact that “any northward advance from Basra was impeded both by the Iraqi sabotage of communications and by the annual floods on the Two Rivers...” Therefore, London found itself in a position to solicit the services of General Wavell:

In view of situation in Iraq which is not that which we visualized when India took responsibility it seems operational command should now pass temporarily to Mideast whence alone immediate assistance can be given. This will take place forthwith unless you see strong objections. 88

London quickly discovered that Wavell voiced much more than “strong objections” to its request. There appear to be two primary factors which influenced Wavell’s reticence. First, Wavell, “like most British officers [was] strongly pro-Arab.” 89 This is how Churchill described Wavell. But it is unlikely that Wavell was an actual proponent of all that being pro-Arab

87 Churchill, 260.
89 Kedourie, Arabic Political Memoirs and other Studies, 275.
entailed, i.e., pan-Arab Union, British withdrawal, etc. Rather, it is safe to say that Wavell’s pro-Arab sympathies went no further than advocating any policy which might placate the Arab world and, as a result, maintain peace as well as British preponderance in the Middle East. Therefore, also “like most British military officers” the general realized how vital the Middle East was to the home island. Wavell’s greatest fear rested in what he saw as the potency of Arab nationalism and the phenomenon’s threat to British interests in the region. And, of course, this phobia found fertile ground in Wavell’s participation as Middle Eastern Commander-in-Chief during the twilight of the Palestinian Revolt. Not only was the general highly sensitive to the threat of Arab nationalism, but he also realized the effect which British aggression might have in fomenting a region-wide revolution. A second concern of Wavell’s was simply that, in addition to the surfacing of the Iraqi problem, his position in Palestine was in the process of being invested from all directions but the south. It seemed to Wavell that the Middle East would stand as the Germans’ main point of concentration.90 In the general’s eyes, the advent of the Iraqi crisis made an already impossible situation even more so. Part and parcel of Wavell’s fear of envelopment was his great concern over the lack of resources at his disposal. Obviously, with men and material tied-up in the western desert of Egypt, fleeing off the Greek mainland, and preparing for the imminent Nazi invasion of Crete, Wavell felt alone and under equipped. These two factors, therefore, were at the crux of Wavell’s apprehension to attempt any forceful intervention into Iraq. Wavell wanted

nothing to do with Iraq, and even if he had, according to his appraisal, he simply would not have the resources to make any difference.91

Thus, London transferred control of an extremely crucial operation from Auchinleck, who had both the force and will to be effective, to Wavell who was more than reluctant to assume the operation's logistical and political demands. Just before receiving London's dispatch, Wavell was in Cyrenaica addressing General Erwin Rommel's assault on Tobruk. The Wavell's 3 May response to the London dispatch reads as follows:

I have consistently warned you that no assistance could be given to Iraq from Palestine in present circumstances and have always advised that a commitment in Iraq should be avoided. My forces are stretched to limit everywhere and I simply cannot afford to risk part of forces on what cannot produce any effect. I can only advise negotiation with Iraqis on basis of liquidation of regrettable incident by mutual agreement with alternative of war with British Empire, complete blockade and ruthless air action.92

Despite the general's obvious displeasure, he nevertheless attempted to "create the impression that a large force was being prepared for action from Palestine."93 The force (code name "Habforce"), consisted of one mechanized brigade, one field regiment, one lorry-borne infantry battalion and three mechanized squadrons of the Transjordan Frontier Force, a fighting group made up of Arabs.94 Although formidable in size, the force had no armored cars or tanks and possessed very few anti-aircraft or anti-tank weapons.95 According to Wavell, "Habforce" was too weak and too late. Furthermore,

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91Connell, Wavell: Scholar and Soldier, 437-438.
92Ibid., 435.
93Ibid.
95Ibid.
the general believed that the expedition deprived him of his only response
force to Vichy-controlled Syria which Wavell believed, and correctly so, was
under the influence of Axis intriguing.96

London’s attitude towards Wavell’s posture reflected both the concern and
alarm with which it was viewing the whole crisis.

We much deplore the extra burden thrown upon you at this critical time
by events in Iraq. A commitment in Iraq was however inevitable. We
had to establish a base at Basra, and control that port to safeguard Persian
oil in case of need.
The line of communication to Turkey through Iraq has also assumed
greater importance owing to German air superiority in the Aegean Sea . . .
Had we sent no forces to Basra the present situation at Habbaniya might
still have arisen under Axis direction, and we should have also have had
to face an opposed landing at Basra later on instead of being able to face to
secure a bridgehead there without opposition . . . There can be no question
of accepting Turkish offer of mediation. We can make no concessions.
The security of Egypt remains paramount. But it is essential to do all in
our power to save Habbaniya and to control the pipeline to the
Mediterranean.97

Tensions between London and Cairo were great, and Wavell’s 5 May reply
did nothing to mollify Whitehall’s growing anxiety: “Your [message] takes
little account of realities. You must face facts.” The general believed that
such a force, weak as it was, would have, at best, a marginal effect on
Habbaniya. Furthermore, he questioned the ability of the R.A.F. cantonment
to withstand the Iraqis. Wavell went on: “I feel it my duty to warn you in the
gravest possible terms that I consider that the prolongation of fighting in Iraq
will seriously endanger the defense of Palestine and Egypt. The political
repercussions will be incalculable, and may result in what I have spent the

96Connell, Wavell: Scholar and Soldier, 435.
97Kirk, 71.
last two years trying to avoid, namely, serious internal trouble in our bases."\textsuperscript{98} Wavell closed his message by admonishing London to accept a negotiated settlement via Turkish good offices.

Wavell's reply reached Whitehall at nearly the same time that General Auchinleck offered to dispatch five more infantry brigades from India. Not surprisingly, John Connell writes that, "Churchill was 'not content' with Wavell's [efforts] but 'gratified' by Auchinleck's."\textsuperscript{99} Therefore, after consulting with the Chiefs of Staff, whose support he had, Churchill sent the following message to Wavell on 6 May:

Settlement by negotiation cannot be entertained . . . Realities are that Rashid Ali has all along been hand-in-glove with Axis Powers, and was merely waiting until they could support him before exposing his hand. Our arrival at Basra forced him to go off half-cock before the Axis was ready. Thus there is an excellent chance of restoring the situation by bold action, if it is not delayed. Chiefs of Staff have, therefore, advised Defense Committee that they are prepared to accept responsibility for dispatch of the force specified in your telegram at the earliest possible moment.\textsuperscript{100}

In response to the prime minister's message, on 8 May, Wavell stated he feared that the known handicaps of "Habforce" might bring about its quick defeat, and, that Great Britain should avoid "a heavy military commitment in a non-vital area."\textsuperscript{101} To prevent either or both outcomes, Wavell again admonished Whitehall to negotiate.\textsuperscript{102}

Realizing his general's "cares and devotions," Churchill, on the next day, succinctly expressed Whitehall's attitude on the vital nature of the upcoming

\textsuperscript{98}Churchill, 257.
\textsuperscript{100}Churchill, 258.
\textsuperscript{101}Kirk, 73.
\textsuperscript{102}Ibid.
campaign:

Our information is that Rashid Ali and his partisans are in desperate straits. However this may be, you are to fight hard against them. The mobile column being prepared in Palestine should advance as you propose, or earlier if possible, and actively engage the enemy, whether at Rutba or Habbaniya. Having joined the Habbaniya forces, you should exploit the situation to the utmost, not hesitating to try to break into Baghdad even quite small forces, and running the same kind of risks the Germans are accustomed to run and profit by. There can be no question of negotiation with Rashid Ali... Such negotiation would only lead to delay, during which the German air force will arrive.103

Churchill further enunciated the campaign’s objective while, at the same time, he allayed Wavell’s fears of being “bogged-down” in Iraq by adding the following: “You do not need to bother much about the long future in Iraq. Your immediate task is to get a friendly Government set up in Baghdad, and to beat down Rashid Ali’s forces with the utmost vigor.”104 On 13 May, Wavell responded favorably to Churchill’s orders in stating that he would “try to liquidate [the] tiresome Iraqi business quickly.”105

The “Habforce” column arrived at Habbaniya on 18 May. Despite the fact that the garrison had been secured, Iraqi forces had persisted in holding the strategic bridge across the Euphrates and Falluja. On 19 May elements of “Habforce” and the air base itself set off to break the Iraqi force which, in essence, served as the only wall of resistance between Habbaniya and Baghdad, “Habforce’s” destination. After three days of contact, and not a single British casualty, “Habforce” had given itself a clear road to Baghdad. During this same time, the R.A.F. was able to take on and eliminate German

103Ibid.
104Ibid.
105Churchill, 262.
and Italian air resistance on the "northern air fields of Iraq."\textsuperscript{106}

With its rear secure, "Habforce" set off for Baghdad on the evening of 27 May. The British contingent reached the outskirts of the capital city on 30 May. Despite the scant numbers of "Habforce," its presence sent Rashid Ali and his party fleeing for Persia.\textsuperscript{107} The next day, an armistice was signed and a new government under the leadership of Nuri Sa’id was established. With this, the Rashid Ali Revolt was ended, and Great Britain, in the midst of further developments in the western desert and Eastern Mediterranean could now look upon its Mesopotamian flank with great relief.

\textsuperscript{106}Playfair, vol. II, 188.
\textsuperscript{107}Hirszowicz, 171.
CHAPTER V

OVERVIEW OF THE BRITISH CAMPAIGN

By the end of May 1941, two flash points of hostility had ended: first, the situation in Iraq had been diffused with splendid execution, and second, the stand-off between the Wavell and Churchill camps had ceased. In addition to the problem at hand, namely the coup, the Iraqi campaign was highlighted by a clash between the aggressiveness of Churchill and the calculation and trepidation of Wavell. Having surveyed the facts of the campaign, one may now look at British policy in Iraq with a critical eye.

Without much doubt, the key to Great Britain’s victory in Iraq, and its eventual stabilization of the Arab East, rested upon the aggressive attitude of Churchill. The prime minister’s stance was most aptly characterized in the following statement: “What matters is action; namely, the swift advance of the mobile column to establish effective contact between Baghdad and Palestine. Every day counts, for the Germans many not be long.”108 Major-General John Kennedy, Deputy Director of Military Operations, states that “Churchill thirsted for action . . . He fretted at the delays which are inseparable from the preparation of modern fighting forces, and he pressed us incessantly to ‘grapple with the enemy.’”109 Complementing Churchill’s aggressive nature was his tendency to welcome “the gamble”—at a time when the British military was ill-equipped to fight on par with the Germans,

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108Kennedy, 62.
109Ibid., 121.
Churchill believed that Great Britain "... must not shrink from running ... small-scale military risks, nor from facing the possible aggravation of political dangers from failure."\textsuperscript{110} And finally, the prime minister immersed himself in the challenge at hand; he became a student of the problem, a scholar, and would find interest "in the minutest details of everything the Chiefs of Staff did," pouring "out floods of memoranda upon all problems, great and small."\textsuperscript{111} The prime minister's dabbling, at times, however, could bring him to reverse the decisions of military authority, as with Wavell, or in his later operation "Tiger." All of these Churchillian characteristics--action, audacity, leadership, and an indefatigable zest to be "in the know"--certainly gave the British campaign a great advantage.

The ready and willing hand of Auchinleck was vital to the prime minister's efforts in Iraq. In view of Wavell's reticence, it would have been difficult for Churchill to secure Basra without the timely assistance of Auchinleck. Auchinleck's readiness to help should not, however, be looked upon as being totally selfless. A secure Iraq was important to India. According to Auchinleck, "... it [was] impossible for India to dissociate herself from the formation of policy in that area. Not only [was] success or failure in Iraq vital to the safety of India but most of the forces and material employed in that theater must come from India."\textsuperscript{112}

Clearly, both Churchill and Auchinleck had their reasons for wanting a quick, forceful end to the revolt. Churchill most clearly expressed his anxiety over the Middle Eastern dilemma in a 28 April directive to the British War

\textsuperscript{110}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{111}Ibid., 161.
\textsuperscript{112}Connell, \textit{Auchinleck}, 80.
Cabinet which stated: "The loss of Egypt and the Middle East would be a disaster of the first magnitude for Great Britain, second only to successful invasion and final conquest. It is to be impressed upon all ranks that the life and honour of Great Britain depends on the successful defense of Egypt."\(^{113}\)

The prime minister obviously considered Egypt vital to the defense of the Middle East and the British Empire. The country served as the linchpin which, by means of the Suez Canal, maintained the flow of communications between the eastern and western parts of the Empire. The Canal served as the primary portal "by which reinforcements would reach the Mediterranean Fleet; it would be an essential waterway of the Middle East Base; and it would be the means of exit if the Mediterranean Fleet had to go to the Far East."\(^ {114}\)

The Canal's usefulness was perhaps most aptly reflected in the speedy transfer of East Indian troops from Bombay to the crucial "Crusader" (November 1941) and El Alamein (Fall 1942) campaigns.\(^ {115}\) The value of the Suez Canal lay in the fact that these forces needed to travel only 950 miles as compared to the 4,200 miles which would have been needed by way of the Cape of Good Hope. The Canal also simplified the transit of oil from fields in Persia and Mesopotamia to Allied operations in North Africa and Europe. Quite simply,

\(^{113}\)Kennedy, 109.

\(^{114}\)Playfair, vol. I, 89.

\(^{115}\)Operation "Crusader" of 18 November 18 1942 was the British Eighth Army's first desert offensive. As Richard Humble states, "'Crusader' not only cracked the myth of the German 'Desert Fox,' Rommel, and the invincibility of his Afrika Korps: it was the first clear-cut defeat suffered by the German Army since the outbreak of the Second World War, after over two years of unbroken triumph on all fronts." Richard Humble, Crusader (London: Leo Cooper, 1987), ix. The El Alamein campaign of Fall 1942 was General Bernard Law Montgomery's decisive repulse of German forces just 63 miles west of Alexandria.
at a time when the Empire was under the greatest strain, the Canal afforded Great Britain the flexibility and ease that it needed to assure the fast flow of troops and raw materials.

In addition to the Canal, Egypt "possessed the essential attributes of a large overseas base."116 After 1937, the country took on the characteristics of an advanced operational fortress with the ability to support naval, ground, and air forces. The Mediterranean Fleet had bases at Suez, Port Sa'id, and Alexandria, the latter being the most significant. In addition to the possession of coal, oil, and petrol stocks, Alexandria served as the repair base for the Royal Navy's heavy ships. It also acted as the chief supply depot for the British island fortress at Malta, a vital installation in the Allied effort to foil the shipment of Axis material through the Mediterranean to Tripoli.

Likewise, Egypt was an essential link in the air route between Europe and India and all points beyond. Finally, Great Britain relied on the area to billet and support an army of roughly one-quarter of a million men.

The Egyptian base and the forces there were quite impressive, but despite the Middle Eastern Command's size, Great Britain had reasons to be skeptical. The Chiefs of Staff were afraid of what German air power might do to British naval installations in the area: Alexandria, not being enclosed, and with its oil refineries too close to the port itself, was seen as a highly desirable air target; there was also much anxiety expressed over the vulnerability of oil refineries, and storage installations at Suez and Port Sa'id117

Very real threats to Crete, Libya, and, of course, Iraq, exacerbated Great

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116 Playfair, vol. I, 64.
117 Ibid., 110.
Britain's challenge to defend Egypt. An Axis-occupied Iraq would have jeopardized the safety of the eastern Egyptian frontier and might have proven an ideal base for German and Italian air missions into northern Egypt. Just as the prime minister issued the 28 April directive, Egypt's approaches were under intense pressure from Rommel, who was in the process of besieging Tobruk (350 miles west of Alexandria), and German forces in the Balkans, which were about to seize Athens. The German prospect of "envelopment" was indeed a looming fear in Great Britain. In fact, Kennedy stated during the spring of 1941, that "Whether we can hold onto the Middle East depends on one thing and one thing alone--whether the Germans concentrate seriously against us there. If they do, they will be able to develop attacks in considerable strength from the west through Libya, from the north through Turkey, and possibly from the northeast through the Caucasus and Persia." 118 In short, the fall of Iraq into Axis hands would have made the German effort to "envelop" Egypt and the Suez Canal a much easier one.

An additional reason for British action relates to Iraq's control of the overland route between Basra and Palestine. 119 With the Suez Canal under Axis pressure from the west, the Basra to Palestine "bridge" took on greater importance since, in the event of a German victory in Egypt, it would serve as the prime conduit by which men and material from India and the Far East could travel to the eastern Mediterranean. This British concern was heightened by the additional point of British rights under the 1930 Anglo-Iraqi Treaty. The defense of this agreement formed the essence of Great Britain's action in Iraq. And although the defense of British rights of transit

118 Kennedy, 137.
seemed to be more of a convenient excuse than anything else, at the time of the coup, the stabilization of the Basra to Palestine road was a serious matter for Great Britain.

Robert Leckie states in his work, *Delivered from Evil* that “The oil fields of the Persian Gulf nations contained those supplies that nourished not only British war-making capacity but its population and industry as well . . .”\(^{120}\) Oil had long been a commodity of prime importance to Great Britain. With the advent of war, oil became the lifeblood which enabled Britain and her allies to wage war against the Axis. British firms possessed crucial oil fields in Persia and northern Iraq at Kirkuk and Mosul. Because of these concessions, it was clearly to Great Britain’s strategic advantage that Iraq and Persia be stabilized. Great Britain had to pay particularly close attention to the pipeline which ran from the Kirkuk and Mosul fields to Haifa. What made the Haifa refineries so crucial was their role as the principal fuel source for the Mediterranean Fleet.\(^{121}\) Obviously, if Axis forces had been able to get to the British pipeline, the mobility and effectiveness of His Majesty’s ships in the Mediterranean would have been severely crippled. One cannot help but wonder what might have happened if supply lines to Rommel’s *Afrika Korps* had been able to operate unhindered. The supply of Rommel’s army was highly dependent upon the flow of Italian and German shipping across the central Mediterranean. However, British surface ship, submarine and air forces operating out of Crete, Egypt, Gibraltar, Malta, and Palestine were quite effective in slowing the tank forces of the *Afrika Korps*.


\(^{121}\)Playfair, vol. I, 187.
A disaster worse than Great Britain being isolated from the bulk of her oil supplies would have been reserves falling into Axis hands. Wavell, in May 1940, knew that Britain and its allies had “access to practically all the world’s supplies of oil.” He also believed that “Germany [was] very short of oil and [had] access to very limited quantities.” Because of this, Wavell felt that the Allies were “bound to win the war.”

But, with the Afrika Korps pressing hard in the Western Desert, and the Axis building strength in the Aegean, it was not inconceivable that tables could have been turned in the favor of Germany.

After 31 March, British Military Intelligence and Whitehall concluded that Germany was on its way to invading the Soviet Union on or near 10 June. Earlier, Military Intelligence, for various reasons, believed that the Wehrmacht was poised to make war on the Middle East. For some time, Whitehall and its intelligence services were convinced, despite the presence of information that should have belied such a conviction, that the Germans were intent on destroying the British Empire through a move on the Arab East. In fact, in late April, the Department of Military Intelligence conceded, in a brief to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, John Dill, that “If Germany can beat us, Russia is in the bag. Russia does not represent an obstacle to Germany in her battle with Great Britain. A pincer movement (on Suez) is the most likely course.” Such sentiment pervaded British strategic concerns until 31 May, when Military Intelligence, through information

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122 Connell, Wavell: Scholar and Soldier, 232.


124 Hinsley, 440-441.

125 Ibid., 474.
extracted from “Enigma” intelligence, concluded that a German invasion of
the Soviet Union was a virtual certainty: “It becomes harder than ever to
doubt that the object of these movements of the German army and air force is
Russia. From rail movements towards Moldavia in the south to ship
movements towards the Varanger Fjord in the far north there is everywhere
the same steady eastward trend. Either the purpose is blackmail or it is
war.”126

It is important to mention that on the same day of the “Enigma” report
hostilities in Iraq subsided with the signing of an armistice in Baghdad.
Therefore, prior to the 31st, the British government had considered a possible
German move into Russia as speculative. From Whitehall’s point-of-view,
rather than expecting an impending attack on Russia, it appeared as if all
German roads led to the Middle East. With Libya, Greece, and Crete occupied,
or on their way to being occupied, a German move into Syria and Iraq
appeared to be part of a logical progression. Furthermore, in view of
communications and oil, Great Britain’s fear of a German “pincer move” was
perhaps all the more justified. After all, the Middle East did belong to Great
Britain—she relied on the region to fuel her war-making capabilities.
Without these benefits Whitehall knew that its ability to compete with the
Axis powers would be significantly curtailed.

Under these circumstances, then, it would have been foolish for Whitehall
to think that Hitler would not make a committed move into the Middle East
through Turkey, Syria, or Iraq. It would have been equally careless for Great

126Ibid. “Enigma” was the German enciphering system. Despite the Nazi
belief that it was unbreakable, Great Britain, with the aid of Polish decoding
experts, was able to solve “Enigma” by the spring of 1941.
Britain to have neglected the Iraqi situation, even if Whitehall had known in April and May that the Germans were bent on moving into Russia. Most British experts believed that the Soviet Union could not hold-out for more than a month. They also felt, and correctly so, that the Middle East would have been Hitler's next move. A deep penetration into southern Russia would have given the needed resources and geographical position for the Germans to move into the Arab East. It was essential for Great Britain to do all that it could to stabilize and fortify its Middle Eastern bastion. An integral part of this effort was a speedy pacification of the Iraqi situation.

From the British point-of-view, the first line of defense, in a German descent from the Aegean, would be Turkey. As Kennedy believed, "Turkey would be [Great Britain's] front line and [its] bastion." This made a pro-British or, at least, neutral Turkey essential. Whitehall considered the Turkish army formidable, and thought that the Ankara government would "fight back" if she were attacked. In addition, Chief of the Imperial General Staff prior to Dill, Sir Edmund Ironside, believed that "If Turkey comes in against the Germans there is no possibility of Turkey being overrun such as there is in a country like Roumania whose army is not of high quality." However, Great Britain viewed the issue of Turkish allegiance with anxiety.


129 Ibid., 26.

130 Ibid., 86.

In fact, a few individuals within British ruling circles felt that a feeble British performance in Iraq might alienate the Turks, and, in turn, send them into Axis arms. Auchinleck stated that "... the fall of Iraq to the Axis would mean the loss of oil fields, and the possibility of Turkey swinging towards the Axis."\(^{132}\) In a 16 February brief, Kennedy captured the General Staff's mood on the issue, stating that the "support of Turkey is ... important since Turkey is the bastion of our position in the Middle East. If Turkey sees our reserves thrown away in Greece it may tip the balance against her resistance to the Germans."\(^{133}\) One might infer that just as Ankara was eying the events in Greece it was paying an equal amount of attention to the British campaign in Iraq. A solid British performance was imperative as it perhaps meant the difference between a friendly Turkey and an antagonistic one.

Not only might resolute action in Iraq by Great Britain reassure the Turks, it could also admonish other states to stay neutral or pro-British, lest they suffer the same fate as the Baghdad conspirators. Iraq was not the only state which was entertaining Axis intrigues—Egypt’s Aziz al-Misri and King Farouk, Iran’s Riza Shah, India’s Subhas Bose, and Afghanistan’s Abdul Majid Khan, certainly fell into this category.\(^{134}\) It was imperative that Whitehall be resolute in its Iraq policy. Great Britain’s conduct in Mesopotamia could either prove a deterrent to opportunism or, as Auchinleck stated, "Britain’s weaknesses would be revealed and other

\(^{132}\)Connell, Auchinleck, 74.

\(^{133}\)Kennedy, 84.

\(^{134}\)Churchill, 485; D.G.F.P., vol. XIII, no. 120; Ibid., no. 145; P.J. Vatikiotis, The History of Modern Egypt (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press), 345.
interests in the area might be encouraged to support the Axis.”135

Churchill’s policy attitude was contradicted by that of Wavell. As the reader has seen, Wavell’s actions were encumbered by the conviction that his resources were too few and his problems in relation to the Arab nationalist question too many. We have spoken about the tremendous stress which Wavell’s Cairo command operated under from the west and north during the spring and summer of 1941. This, coupled with the pan-Arab threat, understandably engendered a state-of-mind in Wavell which would not favor taking-on further operations. Wavell wrote: “I always disliked Iraq—the country, the people and the military commitment... it blew up at the worst possible time for me, when I had the Western Desert, Crete, East Africa and Syria on my hands, and no troops.”136

In all fairness to Wavell, the revolt brought to the fore poignant memories which had accumulated during his command in Palestine during the Arab revolt of the late 1930’s. The uprising, which Wavell called “a very unsatisfactory and intangible business” made the general highly sensitive to the potency of Arab nationalism. And, in a way, this hypersensitivity blinded him from the more pressing issue at hand, namely, it appearing that the Germans were headed south. Action was imperative, and again, as Churchill stated earlier, Great Britain could not be daunted by “possible aggravation of political dangers from failure.”137 Moreover, Churchill truly led by example. Perhaps his most notable ‘gamble’ was the launch of operation “Tiger,” whose

135Connell, Auchinleck, 79-80.
136Connell, Wavell: Scholar and Soldier, 429.
137Kennedy, 121.
beneficiary proved to be, ironically enough, Wavell. "Tiger" was the prime minister's effort to meet the needs of Wavell through the dispatch of a convoy carrying 307 tanks through the Mediterranean to Egypt.\textsuperscript{138} Churchill's move was risky for two reasons. First, and as the prime minister states, "The chances of getting the M.T. ships through the central Mediterranean unscathed were not rated very high."\textsuperscript{139} This was primarily because German dive-bombers operating from southern Europe dominated the area, and British shore-based planes were out of range.\textsuperscript{140} Second, the home island was dreadfully weak in the area of tanks. Of course, there was great fear that a loss of tanks, if "Tiger" were to fail, would bring demands "for their replacement, and consequently a further diversion of tanks from the home forces."\textsuperscript{141} As things turned out, four out of five ships arrived at Alexandria on 7 May and the P.M. labeled the operation a "brilliant success."\textsuperscript{142}

In view of "Tiger," it cannot be said that Churchill ever hesitated to meet Wavell's needs. In addition to shouldering responsibility for an act which essentially took protection away from the British people and sent it onto a perilous journey, Churchill had to deal with the "heat" from many of those within Whitehall, including Dill, Eden, and Kennedy.\textsuperscript{143} It is important to add that Whitehall was wary of a possible German channel crossing. Churchill was undoubtedly taking a great chance with "Tiger." For all that

\textsuperscript{138}Ibid., 110.
\textsuperscript{139}Churchill, 247.
\textsuperscript{140}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{141}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{142}Ibid., 252.
\textsuperscript{143}Arthur Bryant, \textit{The Turn of the Tide} (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957), 203.
the prime minister was doing to better Wavell's situation, the very least that
the general could have done was to reciprocate by meeting Churchill's needs.
Furthermore, as Kedourie asks, "Was the strain on the prime minister in the
spring of 1941... any less?"144 In fact, Kennedy recounts that Churchill's two
most difficult decisions made during the war "were, first, to keep the fighter
aircraft out of France, and, second, to send the tanks and other reinforcements
to Egypt at a time when invasion seemed likely."145 Granted, Wavell was ill-
prepared for making war in 1941. But, unpreparedness was a universal
predicament, e.g. the Habbaniya cantonment. Fortunately for Great Britain
and the entire Allied war effort, Churchill refused to view this as a excuse for
inaction.

Looking beyond Iraqi borders, Rashid Ali had little more luck gaining aid
than he did looking within. For example, upon hearing of the Baghdad
revolt, Aziz al-Misri was blunt in telling Egyptian army officers, who were
optimistic that they might "make Egypt a second Iraq," that they did "not
know Iraqi politicians as well as [he] did."146 Rashid Ali found similar
disinterest coming from Saudi Arabia's King Abd al-Aziz. The King told the
Iraqi premier that he had "blundered and make a big mistake in fighting
Great Britain at such a critical time, and that any difference of opinion
between themselves and Great Britain should have been solved by peaceful
means."147

144Kedourie, Arabic Political Memoirs and other Studies, 280.
145Kennedy, 80. "Tiger" was accountable for taking one-third of the home-

island's tank force.
146Anwar El Sadat, Revolt on the Nile (New York: The John Day

147Warner, 120-121.
These reactions appear to indicate the simple fact that the Arab nationalist movement, at this time, appeared to be nothing more than a shapeless, ununified, counter position to British imperialism. It had very little popular and international appeal. One might be able to make a good case that nationalism, being a European import to the Arab East via Berlin and elsewhere, was, for the most part, incompatible with a highly stratified Iraqi society.

This is not to say that the Rashid Ali coup d'état was not based on the fundamentals and frustrations of Arab nationalism. Although Arab nationalism might have given birth to the Baghdad revolt, it was not, in the eyes of British leadership, save Wavell and Cornwallis, going to spread like wildfire throughout Great Britain’s Middle Eastern position. Rather it was a bevy of military considerations which drove Whitehall’s Iraqi policy. Those who mattered, those who were dictating policy (Churchill, Dill, Eden, Auchinleck), simply could not afford to look beyond pressing military developments at hand. British policy in the area generated itself—the region’s strategic importance meant that the German ring which was quickly closing in on Suez took precedence. Iraq was not regarded as the flash point of a mass Arab movement, instead it was viewed as a possible German bridgehead in the Arab East. In fact, German efforts to exploit the Iraqi coup d’état were not as energetic as they could have been. In light of this, Kedourie broaches an excellent point. German designs in north Africa were to be mostly small-scale and defensive, but because of the energetic initiative of Rommel, this primarily “defensive” operation turned into an offensively-minded foray which became a grave threat to British positions in Egypt and Palestine. As
Kedourie states, "How can the possibility of another Rommel be ruled out in the case of Iraq?" Also, could Wavell have afforded to isolate himself from India? We have already explored the possibilities relating to an Axis-occupied Iraq and the impact on the flow of men and materials through the Suez Canal or the Basra to Palestine land bridge. As can be seen, inaction and negotiation, on the part of Wavell could have presented a number of pitfalls, as well as "far-reaching or lasting injury" to the Allied war effort.

Overrating the question of Arab nationalism detracted from the issue at hand which was to plug the ever-widening breach in Great Britain's Middle Eastern front.

Four factors constituted the cornerstones of the British campaign, all having a direct relation to its active nature. One need only look to the 18 April landing of Anglo-Indian troops at Basra to find they were the first key British move. This decision, as Churchill put it, "set [the Iraqis] off at half-cock." In essence, Whitehall's move fomented an overconfident, under-equipped and undertrained Iraqi military into action. By doing this, Great Britain was able to confront the Iraqis who were without the benefit of Axis aid. The second vital move was the "spirited" preemptive strike by the R.A.F. at Habbaniya. As mentioned earlier, Smart's action robbed the Iraqi command of its strategic advantage which it held through its possession of the heights overlooking Habbaniya. Third, we can assume that the strength of Whitehall's policy in Iraq, perhaps admonished other pro-Axis cells

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148 Kedourie, Arabic Political Memoirs and other Studies, 278.
149 Churchill, 266.
150 Ibid., 258-239.
throughout the British Empire from catching inspiration from Rashid Ali and his followers. Interestingly enough, in a 25 May message from the Iranian government to the German Foreign Ministry, the Iranians expressed its reservations about the proposed delivery of oil to pro-Axis forces in Iraq as it was fearful of British reprisals.\textsuperscript{151} Obviously, with British forces on the way to Baghdad, the Iranian government probably sensed that Churchill, perhaps learning of Axis-Persian collaboration, would not be content with stopping at the Tigris, but would rather opt for continuing on into Persia. In fact, two months later, the pro-Axis Bandar Shah government folded two days after the bold joint Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran was launched on 25 August.

Finally, the most vital decision taken by Whitehall was one which shifted the command of “Habforce” from Wavell to the Chiefs of Staff. As Churchill recounted, the Chiefs of Staff “overruled from Whitehall the judgment of the man on the spot. They took the issue out of his hands and assumed the responsibility themselves for ordering the relief of Habbaniya and for rejecting all ideas of negotiation with Rashid Ali and of accepting Turkish mediation, which at one time was mentioned.”\textsuperscript{152}

Quite clearly, the difference between British victory and disastrous defeat in Iraq dwelled in Whitehall’s ability to decide between active or inactive policies. Fortunately for Great Britain and the larger Allied war effort, London chose action. This is not to say that it was incorrect for Wavell to consider the repercussions of a British defeat in Iraq; British prestige in the region would have hit rock-bottom and results could have been irreparable. Yet, with inaction there was an even greater chance that the same would

\textsuperscript{151}D.C.F.P., vol. XII, no. 552.
\textsuperscript{152}Churchill, 266.
have unfolded. Therefore, the only route to take, was one of preemptive action. And through what Churchill christened a "brilliant success," Axis and Iraqi hopes were smothered, and British prestige in the Middle East was bolstered.
CHAPTER VI

GERMAN OPERATIONS IN IRAQ

If, for the British, the Iraqi campaign represented a stance of resolution and action, German policy in the region indicated much the opposite. In fact, the Reich’s Iraqi policy, in the spring of 1941, could be best characterized as one of general inaction. Although some leading Germans did advocate the exploitation of British anxieties in Iraq, Churchill himself was to express, in retrospect, that “that Hitler cast away the opportunity of taking a great prize for little cost in the Middle East.”\textsuperscript{153}

A look at Germany’s Iraqi campaign, or “non-campaign,” does provide some indication of what was unfolding in Berlin, as far as strategic and ideological priorities were concerned. The coup, functioning as a “prism of history,” will enable the reader to view the divergence of attitudes within the German government concerning the nature of future Nazi policy towards Great Britain and the Soviet Union. One might even be able to proffer the idea, although inconclusively, that Iraq proved an “eleventh hour” move by a certain cadre of high-level German officials, led by Ribbentrop, to sway their superior, Hitler, from an impending invasion of the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{154} The stance advocated by Ribbentrop, not to mention other notable Nazi officials, was essentially one of total war with Great Britain and, correspondingly, continued conciliation towards Moscow. So, by viewing Berlin’s Iraq policy,

\textsuperscript{153}Churchill, 266.
\textsuperscript{154}Hirszowicz, 79.
one will not be limited to surveying the meager military effort put forth by Germany and her allies, but rather he or she will find that Iraq represented a point of convergence where two philosophical positions, differing both ideologically and strategically, vied for primacy in the realm of Nazi foreign policy. Iraq truly brought to the fore the simple but weighted questions of whether Germany would head east, as laid down in Mein Kampf, or west, by way of Realpolitik?

Because of this we cannot view Iraq as a mere "sideshow" of a much greater world conflict. Although obscure, it was a "point of no return" for Germany--Hitler's ability to squelch any concerted Nazi effort in Iraq basically buried the last viable alternative to a Russian campaign. This chapter will attempt to discuss the ebb and flow of Berlin's response to the Iraqi coup.

Interestingly enough, it was not the Germans who initially sought the establishment of ties between the Berlin and Baghdad governments. Rather, in June 1940, it was the Iraqis who had planted the seeds for diplomatic contact between themselves and Germany. The most notable of the early "secret" meetings took place on 3 July, in Ankara, Turkey, between the Iraqi Minister of Justice Naji Shawkat, and the German Ambassador to Turkey Franz von Papen.155 Shawkat apologized for Iraq's breaking-off of diplomatic relations with Germany and also stressed the current policy of the Rashid Ali government in maintaining normal relations with Italy, and the growing nationalist trend of the Iraqi cabinet. Most importantly, Shawkat intimated that Germany would receive the support of the Iraqi army "when the time came."156

155ibid.
Such contact did not end with the Shawkat trip. In the fall of 1940 the Mufti’s private secretary Osman Kemal Haddad, held close meetings with Nazi officials in Berlin. Haddad presented himself as the representative of both the Arab world and the Arab High Committee, an organization which he claimed comprised of nationalists from Iraq, Syria and Saudi Arabia. His trip sought the establishment of a joint German-Italian declaration on the future of Arab-Axis relations. The declaration was to be comprised of the following five points: first, recognition of the full independence of the Arab countries; second, recognition of the Arab countries’ right to unite; third, recognition of the right of Arab countries to solve the problem of the Jews living in Palestine or other Arab countries; fourth, a statement to the effect that Germany and Italy had no imperialistic designs in respect to Egypt and the Sudan; and fifth, an expression of sympathy for the Arab countries and of a desire for economic cooperation with them.

In return for a declaration of this sort, Haddad guaranteed the renewal of diplomatic relations with Germany, the availing of Iraq’s natural resources to Axis interests, and his willingness to act as mediator between the Axis and other Arab states in reaching similar agreements. Haddad also promised the dismissal of the pro-British Nuri from the government. What was the German response to the proposal? Despite taking a “positive stand” on the matter, Ernst von Weizsäcker did say that the Reich Government would “be prepared to help with captured arms and money,” but that it could “proceed

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157 Hirszowicz, 83-84.
158 Ibid.
160 Ibid., vol. XI, no. 118.
only in agreement with Italy."\textsuperscript{161}

As for the Italians, they viewed the declaration with a certain degree of skepticism. Italian Foreign Minister, Count Galeazzo Ciano, felt that such a statement would not yield much—Italy had furnished aid for the Mufti in the past only to see it squandered.\textsuperscript{162} And second, a public declaration would not mesh with Italian imperialistic interests. The Middle East had been designated as its area of influence in the Tripartite Pact of September 1940.\textsuperscript{163}

In time, however, Germany was able to persuade Rome to consent to some sort of official statement. Made public on 23 October, 1940, it read as follows:

\begin{quote}
Germany [Italy], which has always been animated by sentiments of friendship for the Arabs and cherishes the wish that they may prosper and be happy and assume a place among peoples of the earth in accordance with their historic and natural importance, has always watched with interest the struggle of the Arab countries to achieve that independence. In their efforts to attain this goal Arab countries can count upon Germany's [Italy's] full sympathy also in the future. In making this statement, Germany [Italy] finds herself in full accord with her Italian [German] ally.\textsuperscript{164}
\end{quote}

From the Iraqi point-of-view there was disappointment as Shawkat lamented that he had expected more "... namely a German declaration of Arab independence."\textsuperscript{165} The minister of justice had enough forethought to suspect Italo-German collusion, which was, to a certain degree, valid, as Berlin, at this time, persisted to respect the territorial designs of Italy in the

\textsuperscript{161}\textit{Ibid.}, no. 35.
\textsuperscript{162}\textit{Hirszowitz}, 91.
\textsuperscript{163}\textit{D.G.F.P.}, vol. XI, no. 190.
\textsuperscript{164}\textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{165}\textit{Ibid.}
Arab East.\textsuperscript{166}

The 23 October declaration, despite Arab jibbing, should have been considered a diplomatic victory for the Axis. Without tipping their hand too much, Italy and Germany had effectively appeased pro-Axis elements enough to avoid alienating their prospective allies. For roughly the next six months, the Axis powers, especially the Germans, felt comfortable enough to keep their strategic focus on questions more relevant to the Occident. For instance, would Berlin let its \textit{Wehrmacht} loose on London or Moscow?

Perhaps the most intriguing of German ventures over the six months preceding the Iraqi coup was the development of an anti-British coalition. The brainchild of Ribbentrop, the Continental Coalition, as it grew to be known, was to consist of a most bizarre marriage of the following states: Germany, Italy, the Soviet Union, France, and Spain.\textsuperscript{167} Despite persistent efforts by the foreign minister to build the coalition, Spanish, French, and Soviet obstinacy squelched any hope for the alliance. Nevertheless, since the Continental Coalition holds much relevance to the stance assumed by Ribbentrop during the Baghdad revolt, it will be discussed in greater detail later on.

An additional operation Hitler considered at this time was an amphibious invasion of Great Britain (code name “Sea Lion”). As the R.A.F., however, had defeated the \textit{Luftwaffe} in mid-September during the Battle of Britain, inclement weather made a channel crossing risky, and the German Navy lacked the resources needed for a more feasible crossing, “Sea Lion” had to be

\textsuperscript{166}ibid.

put off until spring of the coming year. With both "British-oriented" exercises stalled, Hitler now entertained the thought of moving on the Soviet Union, the planning of which had begun as early as December of 1940. His intentions were made known in the famous "Directive No. 21": "The German Armed Forces must be prepared to crush the Soviet Russia in a quick campaign ("Barbarossa") before the end of the war against England ... Preparations are to be completed by 15 May 1941."

Hitler, from this time on, was fixated on "Barbarossa." But there were those within the German government, both civilian and non-civilian, who were intrigued by events in Iraq and the Eastern Mediterranean in general. The chief figure in the this pro-Iraqi camp was none other than Ribbentrop. The foreign minister was made privy to the potential of the revolt in a 9 April, 1941, meeting with Ernst Woermann, Head of the Political Department of the Foreign Ministry. He explained that "... there was now ... a cabinet which was to be considered the most nationalist and pro-Axis thus far, and that according to the available reports this cabinet had the full support of the Iraqi army ...". Woermann further stated that the coup government "was putting up stiff resistance to the English wishes for the stationing of English troops in Iraq and a more or less unrestricted right of passage."

Woermann's presentation obviously excited the foreign minister, as it was his conviction "that in case no decision against England was obtained this year, the questions of the Middle East might become of decisive importance."

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168 D.G.F.P., vol. XII, no. 299.  
169 Ibid.  
170 Ibid.  
171 Ibid.
Ribbentrop accordingly instructed the Abwehr to "organize an intelligence service in the Middle East, which would have to be confined to purely military matters," in addition to developing "sabotage" and "insurrections" in Palestine, Transjordan, and Iraq. Ribbentrop further demanded the "immediate" organization of the Foreign Ministry's own intelligence service in "north Africa and the Middle East," independent of "the Abwehr and the SD service." He then went on to say that "... all of [their] work in the area mentioned be immediately and rapidly activated."  

The next day, Ribbentrop, as requested by Woermann, acquired Hitler's approval for the dispatch of arms to the Iraqi rebels. But, in a 21 April message from Ribbentrop to Hitler, it was made clear that, "... the possibilities of giving assistance [had] been studied," and that "... speedy assistance [was] possible only by air." The foreign minister included that, "... direct intervention by Luftwaffe units in Iraq [was] out of the question, since that exceeded the range of the Luftwaffe." It was thought, however, that arms could be flown to Iraq through individual aircraft, provided they were given the benefit of stopping-over in Syria. This idea unofficially signaled the introduction of the Vichy government as a participant in the German venture.  

Meanwhile, with British resolve strengthening, it became apparent that the Iraqis were increasingly frustrated by the lack of Axis action. Accordingly,

172 Ibid.  
173 Ibid., no. 377.  
174 Ibid.  
175 Ibid., no. 401.  
176 Ibid., no. 415.
on 24 April, Italian officials, in Baghdad, reported that "... the Iraqi government was quite annoyed because it had yet received no reply to its request for Axis support by Axis aviation," as "... the situation was becoming downright critical."\textsuperscript{177}

After hearing this news, Ribbentrop again took the matter to Hitler. Skillfully playing upon Hitler's desire to have a friendly Turkey at the time of "Barbarossa," the foreign minister reminded his Fuehrer that a British victory in Iraq would put the English in a position to influence Syria, which could, in turn, effect the actions of the Ankara government.\textsuperscript{178} His ability to recognize Hitler's interest in "Barbarossa" enabled Ribbentrop to keep the leader's attention.

As far as the utilization of Vichy forces in Syria were concerned, Ribbentrop was hopeful of possibly obtaining French arms in Syria, which could then be flown a short distance to Iraq. The foreign minister did, however, believe that the confirmation of such a plan was highly contingent upon the strengthening of relations between Vichy and German governments.\textsuperscript{179}

The most glaring problem with the German stipulation was simply that it would take time to fulfill, a commodity which Rashid Ali and the Axis were short of, especially after the 2 May British repulse at Habbaniya. The coup government's urgency found reflection in the following 5 May message from Iraqi officials in Ankara to the German embassy:

The Iraqi government requests immediate military aid. In particular a

\textsuperscript{177}Ibid., no. 401.
\textsuperscript{178}Ibid., no. 457.
\textsuperscript{179}Ibid., no. 435.
considerable number of airplanes in order to prevent further English landings and to drive the English from the airfields. The Iraqi minister asked for an answer tomorrow if in any way possible.180

If the Germans were going to pursue action in Iraq, they had to do so immediately. Ribbentrop, sensing opportunity passing, attempted to apply greater importance to the Iraqi question in the following 3 May message to Hitler:

If the available reports are correct regarding the relatively small forces the English have landed in so far, there would seem to be a great opportunity for establishing a base for warfare against England through an armed Iraq. A constantly expanding insurrection of the Arab world would be of the greatest help in the preparation of our decisive advance toward Egypt.181

Finally, after a close appraisal of Ribbentrop's statement, Hitler consented "that everything possible be done with regard to military support."182 With Hitler's approval secured, Ribbentrop immediately turned to the idea of utilizing Syria, not just for her airfields and refueling facilities, but also for its plentiful stock of weapons which would be ideal for bolstering the fire-power of the Iraqi military.183

It took very little time for Berlin to acquire the Vichy government's permission to utilize Syria for the proposed plan. The Vichy French, who seemed quite optimistic that the Germans would succeed in Iraq, on 8 May confirmed the following concessions:

(a) The stocks of French arms under Italian control in Syria to be made available for arms transports to Iraq; (b) Assistance in the forwarding of arms shipments of other origin that arrive in Syria by land or by sea for Iraq; (c) Permission for German planes, destined for Iraq, to make

180Ibid.
181Ibid., no. 436.
182Ibid., no. 435.
183Ibid., no. 436.
intermediate landings and to take on gasoline in Syria; (d) Cession to Iraq of reconnaissance, pursuit and bombing planes, as well as bombs, from the air force permitted for Syria under the armistice treaty; (e) An airfield in Syria to be made available especially for the intermediate landing of German planes; (f) Until such an airfield has been made available, an order to be issued to all airfields in Syria to assist German planes making intermediate landings.\textsuperscript{184}

What did Vichy get in return for assisting Germany? As William Langer states, the Germans “were to permit the rearmament of six French destroyers and seven torpedo boats, to relax the stringent travel and traffic regulations between the zones of France, and to arrange for a substantial reduction of the costs of occupation.”\textsuperscript{185}

The first signs of German aid came through on 10 May with the arrival of the Reich’s newly appointed representative to Iraq, Dr. Fritz Grobba. Accompanying the Nazi official were two Heinkel He 111 bombers. Further additions to the Iraqi arsenal included a squadron each of He 111’s and Messerschmidt fighter-bombers.\textsuperscript{186} Meanwhile, a few days later, Rudolph Rahn, a special Foreign Ministry envoy, arrived in Syria to organize the proposed flow of munitions to Iraq. Rahn’s efforts produced the first arrival of supplies into Mosul on 13 May.

Despite the obvious Axis presence in Mesopotamia, the Iraqi effort was quickly losing momentum. Hitler’s indifference, the overzealousness of the “Golden Square,” the relatively meager flow of Axis aid, and the speed and the effectiveness of “Habforce” all contributed to the rebellion’s eventual

\textsuperscript{184}Ibid., no. 475.
\textsuperscript{186}Warner, 105.
failure. It was not until 23 May that Hitler finally issued "Directive No. 30."

Coming at roughly the same time that Iraqi resistance was crumbling, the directive read as follows:

The Arab liberation movement in the Middle East is our natural ally against Great Britain. In this connection, the rising in Iraq has special importance. It strengthens beyond the boundary of Iraq forces hostile to England in the Middle East, disturbs English communications and ties down English troops and shipping space at the expense of other theaters of war. I have therefore decided to advance developments in the Middle East by giving assistance to Iraq.187

The directive clearly came too late. In fact, one day after its dispatch, many of those involved in the coup, including the Mufti, could sense its impending failure. The pan-Arab leader believed that despite a pan-Arab uprising's great promise, all would soon become moot "if the current uprising in Iraq, which . . . is the key to the situation should fail."188 The Mufti sealed a plea for more German aid by stating the following: "if Iraq should fall during these upcoming days, the anti-English movement throughout the whole Middle East would step-by-step succumb to British gold and intrigues."189 And upon hearing the false word of inflated British troop numbers, which came due to the efforts of British intelligence, the Mufti, and Rashid Ali were forced to flee to Iran, and Grobba to Mosul.

Despite the exit of their leader, local commanders promised to continue the fight, provided the Germans assured "effective military aid."190 And Ribbentrop did state that more aircraft were in flight to Iraq. But, as the planes were unable to land due to the lack of sufficient fueling facilities, the

188 Ibid., no. 537.
189 Ibid., no. 557.
190 Ibid., no. 571.
German promise rang hollow. With word of the Anglo-Iraqi armistice in Baghdad, and the false mention of the Mosul airfield’s capture, Grobba left for Syria on 31 May.¹⁹¹ Later that same day, Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, head of the OKW (High Command of the German armed forces) sent the following message to General Felmy: “All forces are to gather at Alep. Their complete reverse is to be exercised until further intentions have been clarified with the French government in Vichy. Remove Iraqi insignia. Further orders will follow.”¹⁹²

The Keitel dispatch effectively set the German pull-out from Iraq into motion. With this, the hopes of many within the German government were dashed just ten days before the launching of the most devastating military campaign of the twentieth century, “Barbarossa.” So, now that the reader has been supplied with an overview of the events which made up the German campaign in Iraq, it is possible to discuss the “split” rationale characterizing Berlin’s actions in the spring of 1941.

¹⁹¹Ibid., no. 568.
¹⁹²Ibid., no. 577.
CHAPTER VII

OVERVIEW OF THE GERMAN CAMPAIGN

Did Ribbentrop view Iraq as a last-second opportunity to deflect Hitler from a Russian campaign? Unfortunately, in probing for an answer to this question, one discovers that there is no single document which directly links the foreign minister to such an intention. Be that as it may, Bloch, in his biography of Ribbentrop, characterizes the foreign minister's interest in Iraq as "bizarre." This was indeed true. It is also quite correct that Ribbentrop's character was itself very odd. However, in viewing the foreign minister's actions in Iraq, one must wonder if there was indeed method to his madness. Ribbentrop's foray into Middle Eastern affairs came on the eve of Hitler's coveted Russian campaign. Because we see close proximity between Iraq and "Barbarossa," should we not consider the extent of Ribbentrop's intentions during the months of April and May in 1941 as "bizarre," and as a result, worth viewing with a suspicious eye? Despite the absence of irrefutable evidence which might tie the foreign minister to what many hardline Nazis would have considered treasonous activity, an effort will be made, through a multitude of documents, to better understand the nature of Ribbentrop's intentions in Iraq and their relation to "Barbarossa."

Several factors will be assessed in considering Ribbentrop's actions in Iraq: the foreign minister's sociopolitical background, the nature of his contacts

193Bloch, 326.
with other governments during the coup, the timing and tenor of his statements relating to “Barbarossa,” and the speed and insistence with which he handled his pro-coup campaign. Again, it is important to stress that there is no one document which explicitly ties the foreign minister’s efforts to perhaps dissuade Hitler from “Barbarossa.” In any case, we will endeavor with those documents which are available to shed greater light on Ribbentrop’s policy rationale during this crucial period of the Second World War.

As his origins differed from those of most of the party’s elites, the foreign minister had to be viewed as the most unlikely of Nazis. Brought-up in reactionary surroundings, marrying into Berlin’s higher class, and vain enough to have himself adopted by an aristocratic aunt to gain the ennobling “von” prefix, Ribbentrop and his association with the Nazis proved an extremely odd marriage. Furthermore, as a seller of champagne, prior to the Nazi rise to power, Ribbentrop had a weakness for pomp and a definite lust for the “spotlight.” As we shall see, Ribbentrop’s duration as “special counsel” and foreign minister to Hitler certainly reflected a fundamental philosophical divergence between himself and the Fuehrer’s retinue of hard-line Nazis. The following words of Paul Schwarz aptly capture the peculiar

nature of the Ribbentrop-Nazi relationship:

The Nazi party is the limbo of lost and not as yet unrecovered types between the devil of philistinism and the deep sea of the superman. The philistine is catered to by grotesquely worded laws like the Gesetz zur Wieder einfuehrung des Berufsbeamtentums, by the reintroduction of grim discipline, by glorified provincialism like "blood and soil," peasant dances and beer. The superman, on the contrary, revels in gigantic, earthshaking plots, in an endless succession of "world historic decisions," in displays of immoral granduer a la Nietzsche and d'Annunzio, and in laying down the law to trembling continents. Ribbentrop is decidedly trying to sell the world the superman slant.195

Furthermore, the following character of Ribbentrop, by John Weitz, makes the man sound like anything but a Nazi: "He was a rational, conventional man of conservative background, an international businessman who cared about his own and his family's place in German and foreign society."196 It should then be sufficient to say that, in view of his background, Ribbentrop did have a dimension to his personality which was, in some ways, unNazi-like.

How can one then account for Ribbentrop's association with the Nazi party? First, despite not being able to call himself an "old warrior" of the NSDAP, Ribbentrop did harbor a strong distaste for the 1919 Treaty of Versailles and communism.197 Moreover, Ribbentrop's allegiance to Hitler was, for the most part, unswerving. As Weitz states, "From the day he met Adolf Hitler to the day he died on the gallows, even at those times when he received shabby treatment, Joachim von Ribbentrop never showed a moment of disloyalty to Adolf Hitler." Weitz further mentions that Ribbentrop, being

195Paul Schwarz, This Man Ribbentrop (New York: Julian Messner, 1943), 291.
196John Weitz, Hitler's Diplomat (New York: Tichner and Fields, 1992), 79.
197Bloch, 10, 22, 25.
"the son of an officer in the Kaiser’s Army," where “blind loyalty” was “the German officer’s religion,” “would lose his life for being unquestionably faithful to an evil man.” Ribbentrop was able to articulate his attraction to Hitler’s character and mission by recalling, at Nuremberg, the genesis of his most bizarre and, at the same time, slavish worship of the Fuehrer in 1932:

Adolf Hitler made a considerable impression on me even then. I noticed particularly the blue eyes in his generally dark appearance, and . . . his detached nature . . . and the manner in which he expressed his thoughts. His statements always had something final and definite about them, and appeared to come from his innermost self. I had the impression that I was facing a man who knew that he wanted and had an unshakeable will and very strong personality . . . I [was] convinced that this man, if anyone, could save Germany from the greatest distress which existed at the time.

An additional trait to be considered while trying to explain Ribbentrop’s Nazi commitments was the foreign minister’s unmitigated ambition. From the start of his career, Ribbentrop had a great liking for the world of diplomacy—it meshed with his ostentatious and cosmopolitan lifestyle, and fed his thirst for affirmation and recognition. Through his travels and business-dealings, Ribbentrop had been able to construct a network of associations and allegiances which, recognized by Hitler, benefited his rise within the Nazi government. What was more, Ribbentrop had connections with individuals in England, the land which Hitler was to covet for a future Anglo-German alliance. This, combined with the smashing success of the 1935 Anglo-German Naval Agreement, put Ribbentrop at the forefront of all German diplomatic ventures. According to Bloch, the success of the 1935 agreement made Ribbentrop, “a kind of mascot symbolizing Hitler’s professed

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198Weitz, 143.
199Bloch, 25.
desire for better Anglo-German relations." Ribbentrop truly felt himself important—Hitler had given him an enormous amount of responsibility, and there is little doubt that, to Ribbentrop, he was Hitler's most trusted advisor. Such feelings of importance and self-aggrandizement persisted through Ribbentrop's rise to the rank of Ambassador to Great Britain in 1936, German Foreign Minister in 1938, and the months preceding "Barbarossa."

One should now see that Ribbentrop focused his loyalty on three primary points—his conservative past, his Fuehrer, and his ego. This obviously made for a complex character. But, it is now possible to explain how Ribbentrop, despite his strong allegiance to Hitler, did harbor the potential to show a conservative side. He also possessed an eye for those situations which were most ripe for the fattening of his ego. A most telling remnant of Ribbentrop's reactionary past was the foreign minister's definite appreciation for diplomacy in the mold of Bismarckian Realpolitik.

Germany's stratagem for the military conquest of Europe came under the daunting title of Blitzkrieg. Speed, surprise, and supply were vital to the correct execution of this new style of warfare. As the summer of 1941 approached, and after impressively sweeping through the defenses of southern, northern, and western Europe, Hitler was now readied to unleash his Blitzkrieg upon the Soviet Union. The eastern campaign would afford Hitler an opportunity to address several different policy pursuits at one time. Anti-Semitism, anti-Bolshevism, anti-Slavism, and the pursuit of Lebensraum, cornerstones of Nazi party doctrine, and found in the pages of Hitler's 1925 work Mein Kampf would form the basis for the massive invasion. In addition to these doctrinal concerns, Hitler ascribed a certain

\[200\text{Ibid.}, 75.\]
strategic significance to “Barbarossa.” Robbing Great Britain of her “continental sword,” the Fuehrer was confident that London could be “forced into rapid surrender or else come to support the Reich as its ‘junior partner.’”\(^{201}\) The acquiescence of Great Britain to German demands, in addition to meeting strategic concerns, would also serve, as mentioned earlier, Hitler’s desire to join have Great Britain join Germany at the head of an Aryan alliance.\(^{202}\)

Therefore, “Barbarossa” represented an opportunity for Hitler, “in one fell swoop,” to deal with both ideological and strategic priorities. The eastern campaign further sealed the end of a conflict between camps seeking the primacy of either power or ideological politics in the guidance of Nazi foreign policy. According to Klaus Hildebrand, “Barbarossa” revealed the dissolution of a sort of “dual state”:

> On the one hand, there was the rational power political component—though it served goals which were themselves irrational and tainted by racism. The other face of this Janus-state was the irrational racist policy which reached full fruition under the banner of [“Barbarossa”], which Hitler regarded as his personal task.\(^{203}\)

This policy “stand-off” reflected elements of the “old” conservative ruling class, who aided the National Socialist party to attain power, and this same Nazi elite, who wished to replace the “old guard” with the “biologically” superior master race\(^{204}\). In essence, “Barbarossa” secured the supremacy of racially motivated, ideology-based foreign policy, over that of traditional

\(^{201}\)Klaus Hildebrand, The Foreign Policy of the Third Reich (Berkeley, CA.: The University of California Press, 1973), 105.

\(^{202}\)Ibid.

\(^{203}\)Ibid.

\(^{204}\)Ibid.
power politics.

The foremost advocate of the power-political camp was Ribbentrop. His traditional foreign policy agenda definitely harked back to the traditions of pre-Wilhelmine Germany, and stood in total opposition to Hitler's foreign policy programme which was determined by racist ideology. Quite simply, the foreign minister believed in a strong policy of conciliation towards the Soviet Union, while at the same time, seeking the diplomatic isolation of Great Britain by this power bloc. Manifestations of Ribbentrop's efforts lay in the Anti-Comintern Pact 1936 (de facto anti-British), the Pact of Steel of 1939, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, the Tripartite Pact of 1940 and the attempted Quadruple Alliance or Continental Coalition. Interestingly enough, one can find several occasions during Ribbentrop's diplomatic career, and the short time after, where he compared his efforts to those of Bismarck, the most skillful and revered of all German diplomats and a stout supporter of Russo-German détente. In particular, during the Nuremberg Trials, the foreign minister, harking back to the consummation of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, proudly stated that it "was undoubtedly an extraordinary success ... from the point of view of Realpolitik." He went on to say that "The abandonment of Bismarck's Russian policy had been the beginning of Germany's encirclement, which led to the First World War. In the situation prevailing in 1939, the return to the old tradition constituted, from the realist point of view, a security factor of the first magnitude." Ribbentrop obviously

207 Ibid.
relished his ability to bring-about a union between two ideological enemies, and moreover, in what the foreign minister was to call "the spirit of Bismarck." As it appears that Ribbentrop was influenced by the First World War and the consequent Versailles Treaty of 1919, it is possible to understand why the foreign minister coveted a Russo-German union and would do what he could to avoid the same diplomatic isolation which befell Germany in 1914-1918. As Ribbentrop stated in his memoirs, "This British policy of encirclement filled me with growing anxiety, and this cauchmar des coalitions, as Bismarck called it, also gave me many sleepless nights." By the winter season of 1940/41, Ribbentrop, no doubt believing his mission inspired "in the spirit of Bismarck," was well into the development of the Continental Coalition. This "dream alliance" consisting of Germany, Italy, Japan, and it was hoped the Soviet Union, would be dedicated to the destruction and absorption of the British Empire. Ribbentrop further hoped to add both Spain and France to the massive Euro-Asiatic bloc, intended to stretch from Gibraltar to Tokyo. As Ribbentrop stated in his memoirs, he presented Hitler with plans

To convert the Three-Power Pact into a Four-Power Pact including Russia. If we succeeded in this our position would be favourable, for such a combination would neutralize the U.S.A., isolate Britain and threaten her position in the Near East. Such a strong system of alliances might make it possible to end the war with Britain quickly with diplomatic means; without it this was impossible.

208 Ibid., 151.
209 Ibid., 108; Bloch, 10, 22, 25.
210 Ribbentrop, 108.
211 Bloch, 301.
212 Ibid., 302.
213 Ribbentrop, 150.
In view of Hitler's desire to complete an "understanding" of sorts between Germany and Great Britain, how can one explain his foreign minister's obvious contempt for the British Empire? Bloch submits two explanations for Ribbentrop's enmity for Great Britain. First, save the 1935 Naval Agreement, he had been a failure, both politically and socially. Ribbentrop was made to look foolish, by not only the London press, but the highly critical and snobbish London society. In short, the experience made Ribbentrop feel both snubbed and embittered. Moreover, the foreign minister's wife, Annelies, disdained the British for their high-handed posture and ridicule of her husband.

An event in Spain, albeit obscure, seemed to seal Ribbentrop's turn against England. On 29 May, 1937, the battleship Deutschland, participating in the arms blockade of the Non-Intervention Committee, was attacked by Republican forces. The Germans, in retaliation, shelled Almeria, but were insistent on other powers making a similar demonstration off Valencia. When the plea was refused, Ribbentrop, after exchanging barbs with Lord Privy Seal Anthony Eden, walked out of the Non-Intervention Committee. Quite clearly, the die had been cast. And only a few months later, in November, Ribbentrop was to present Count Ciano with plans for the coveted transcontinental anti-British alliance.

Despite the obvious admiration and subservience with which Ribbentrop

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214 Weitz, 106.
214 Ibid.
217 Bloch, 132.
218 Ibid., 134.
regarded Hitler, it should be possible to present the following theory: prior to “Barbarossa,” Ribbentrop, for multiple reasons, might have considered an untracking of Hitler’s ideological drive to Moscow. In this particular case, the “earth-shaking plot” might have come in the form of an active Iraqi policy.

A closer look at the foreign minister’s conduct during the Iraqi coup can be introduced with the following excerpt from The Ribbentrop Memoirs:

Throughout these [winter and spring months of 1941], I reminded Hitler of Bismarck’s Russian policy. I left no stone unturned to achieve a German-Russian alliance after all. Perhaps I would have succeeded in the end had there not been that resistance on ideological grounds which always made the conduct of a foreign policy impossible. It was these ideological considerations, coupled with Russia’s political actions, her military preparations, and lastly her demands, which painted in Hitler’s mind a picture of a monstrous danger threatening Germany. In view of this my arguments counted less and less.219

Ribbentrop’s frustrations concerning “Barbarossa” were again reflected in his dictation of the following words to his Secretary of State, Ernst von Weizsäcker, on 28 April, 1941:

One can perhaps find it enticing to give the Communist system its death blow and perhaps say too that it lies in the logic of things to let the European-Asiatic continent now march forth against Anglo-Saxondom and its allies. But only one thing is decisive: whether this undertaking would hasten the fall of England . . . A German attack on Russia would only give a lift to English morale. It would be evaluated there as German doubt of the success of our war against England. We would in this fashion not only admit that the war would still last a long time, but we could in this way actually lengthen instead of shorten it.220

These are clearly the words of a frustrated man. Ribbentrop, if he were to make an impression on the planning of “Barbarossa,” needed a distraction, an event which would produce immediate results, and give direct indication to

219Ribbentrop, 151.
how fragile the British Empire was.

The first indication of Ribbentrop’s seriousness regarding Iraq was reflected by the speed and vigilance with which he pursued the matter. His sanction of “rapid and immediate” Abwehr and Foreign Office action in the Middle East should have left little doubt that the foreign minister wanted to exploit the possibilities of intervening in the region. The day after Ribbentrop and Woermann met, the foreign minister took the matter directly to Hitler.

After roughly two weeks of waiting, Hitler, on 26 April, finally answered Ribbentrop’s feeler. Although Hitler did approve the shipment of arms to Iraq, he was leery of the somewhat over exaggerated news that 14,000 British troops had disembarked at Basra with another 14,000 on the way. In fact, replying to the Foreign Office, Hitler expressed the belief that “in view of the English landings in Iraq, it was too late.” But, on the next day, the foreign minister, perhaps sensing the impending veto, was quick to point out that “English sources [were] spreading propaganda figures that have no relation to the facts.” In addition to pointing out to Hitler the impact which a pro-British Turkey might have on “Barbarossa,” Ribbentrop further directed the Fuehrer’s attention to the effects which the continuous transit of the India-based British troops might have on German operations in North Africa.

Furthermore, one senses from Ribbentrop’s brief that the foreign minister was attempting to stress to Hitler that preparations for pro-Iraqi operations by German, Italian, and Vichy French forces were indeed in progress. By

221 D.G.F.P., vol. XII, no. 299.
222 Ibid., no. 407.
223 Ibid.
224 Ibid., no. 415.
225 Ibid.
informing Hitler that the operation had already been initiated, Ribbentrop perhaps believed that he might have an easier time gaining Hitler's support. It is interesting to find that all of this came two days after Ribbentrop learned the exact starting date for "Barbarossa" on 25 April.226

Meanwhile, on 3 May, one day after the commencement of hostilities at Habbaniya, Ribbentrop again lobbied for German action in the region. The foreign minister's plea took the following form:

*If the available reports are correct regarding the relatively small forces the English have landed in Iraq so far, there would seem to be a great opportunity for establishing a base for warfare against England through an armed Iraq. A constantly expanding insurrection of the Arab world would be of the greatest help in our decisive advance toward Egypt.*227

Ribbentrop sealed his brief to Hitler by adding, in handwriting, the following statement: "The figures regarding the British in Iraq show again how weak England still is today at the Suez Canal."228 Ribbentrop was obviously insistent on the promise of a move into Mesopotamia. Such a statement intimates a campaign of large scale proportions. In fact, a few days later, in a meeting with Italian authorities, Ribbentrop, again, drew attention to the potential of a sizable operation in the Middle East through Iraq. If Ribbentrop were sincerely loyal to the execution of the Russian campaign, why would he introduce an operation which would not only draw resources from "Barbarossa," but might also threaten the peace of the Balkans and Asia Minor which were, in Hitler's eyes, imperative for a secure southern flank during the Russian campaign? Furthermore, was it merely coincidence that Ribbentrop submitted two comprehensive memoranda relating to large-scale

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226Ribbentrop, 150-152.
228Ibid.
operations in the Middle East (27 April, 3 May), plus an anti-"Barbarossa"
statement (28 April), in a span of only eight days after learning the date for the
Russian invasion on 25 April?

It would seem appropriate to draw attention to the fact that Ribbentrop was
not alone in pushing for action in Iraq. In fact, one can look directly to the
conduct and comments of Woermann and Weizsäcker, two diplomatic
officials with conservative, anti-"Barbarossa" stances. Woermann, in
particular, was of key importance in bringing to Ribbentrop's attention on 7
March and 9 April, the potential of German operations in the Middle East. An additional supporter of greater German action in the Arab East was
Grobba, Ribbentrop's liaison to Baghdad during the coup. In his memoirs,
Grobba stresses Germany's need to identify itself with Arab nationalism and
its drive for independence: "In the last war, we did not take advantage of the
opportunities that we had as a result of the friendly attitude of the Arabs
towards us, because we did not promise the Arabs the independence that
would have been a precondition for their active rebellion."

And although contact between the German military and the Foreign Office
over the Iraqi situation appears to have been at a minimum, there were a
number of officers, at this time, who, if not partial to the Arab East as an
alternative to "Barbarossa," were at least aware of the region's great potential.
Such an idea was part of a wider anti-British posture known as the
"peripheral" strategy. The foremost advocates of the "peripheral" strategy

\[229\text{Ibid., no. 419; Waddington, 26-27.}\]
\[230\text{D.G.F.P., vol. XII, nos. 299, 419.}\]
\[231\text{Grobba, 317-318.}\]
\[232\text{Bloch, 302.}\]
were Grand Admiral Erich Raeder, the commander-in-chief of the German navy, and Hermann Goering, chief of the Luftwaffe. Raeder, in November of 1940, felt that a campaign against Russia should be postponed, "until after victory over Britain, since demands of German forces would be too great, and an end to hostilities could not be foreseen . . . Russia, on her part, will not attempt to attack in the next few years." The naval staff further believed that operations in the eastern Mediterranean could prove "decisive . . . for the outcome of the war." Five months later, on 30 May, Raeder, with the endorsement of the Italian premier, Benito Mussolini, went on to stress that the "Duce demanded urgently decisive offensive off Egypt Suez for Fall of 1941; 12 divisions needed for that. This stroke would be more deadly to the British Empire than the capture of London; Chief, Naval Operations agrees completely . . ." An additional document which reflects the attitude of the German Navy, in particular, Admiral Kurt Assmann, was made known in a briefing with Hitler on 6 June. Assmann's memorandum, outlining an alternative to "Barbarossa," reads as follows:

The British power position in the eastern Mediterranean is under the severest pressure as a result of the Balkan campaign and the occupation of Crete, but it is . . . not yet broken. All the signs indicate, moreover, that the British are in no way inclined to give up their position in the eastern Mediterranean. On the contrary, England appears determined to maintain her position in this area by every means. This is based, as in all areas of decisive importance for the British Empire, upon the exercise of control of the sea by the British battle fleet . . . It alone is in the position to protect the maritime lines of communication which are essential for the control of

233 Bryant, 194-195.
235 Ibid., 165.
the eastern Mediterranean position and to secure the power political influence in Egypt, Palestine, Iraq and to a considerable extent in Turkey, with its ramifications in the African, Indian and even the Far Eastern regions. Upon its shoulders, too, rests the prestige of the British Empire in the eastern Mediterranean. As always, therefore, it remains the aim of German-Italian strategy to destroy the British fleet as the controlling factor, to drive it out of the eastern Mediterranean and to eliminate its bases and operational possibilities in the Mediterranean.

Assmann then adds the caveat, that "in spite of other considerable demands upon German armed forces ("Barbarossa"), all current problems in the area must be tackled and all operational possibilities at present available unconditionally utilized in order to be able to exploit the full considerable successes recently obtained in the Mediterranean at a time when the help of the United States to England has yet to reach decisive proportions."\(^\text{237}\)

While viewing Assmann's and Raeder's statements with a critical eye, we must realize that, especially at this time of the war, the German Navy felt itself underused.\(^\text{238}\) In light of this, the Naval Staff's words may have amounted to nothing more than an attempt at lobbying. After all, it is difficult to imagine the Navy doing much in the way of aiding any operation as during no time of the war was it fully ready for combat against any member of the Allies. But, the fact remains that, despite its rationale, the German Navy, near the time of the Iraqi coup, was partial to anti-British action in the eastern Mediterranean.

An additional advocate of a distinct anti-British policy was Goering. During testimony at Nuremberg, he believed that prior to a move on the Soviet Union, Germany should have "attack[ed] England at Gibraltar and

\(^{237}\)Warner, 164-165.

\(^{238}\)Trial of the Major War Criminals Before the International Military Tribunal: Nuremberg, 14 November 1945-1 October 1946, vol. 5, 271.
Suez.” He went on to stress that “the exclusion of the Mediterranean as a theater of war, the key point Gibraltar-North Africa down to Dakar-Suez, and possibly extended further south, would have required only a few forces, a number of divisions on the one side and a number of divisions on the other, to eliminate the entire insecurity of the long Italian coast line against the possibility of attack.” Goering concluded his views on a Mediterranean campaign, in lieu of an eastern one, by stating that he “urged [Hitler] to put these decisive considerations in the foreground and only after the conclusion of such an undertaking to examine further the military and political situation with regard to Russia.”

One of the few contacts between the Foreign Office and the High Command of the German Army (OKW) supplies further evidence to the German military’s interest in a Middle Eastern campaign. Speaking in response to a 4 February Woermann memo “regarding arms deliveries to Iraq and the associated Arab questions,” the OKW, just the next day, “presented a summary of its wishes . . . regarding a strengthening of German activity in the Arab countries.” The OKW memo starts off by calling for a reexamination of Italy’s freedom of action in the region, and as a result, making a move to redirect “political activity in the Middle East from Germany and to take quick and vigorous action in this matter.” The memo goes on to stress the importance of the German “recognition of the independence of Arabia as a war aim of the Axis. We are in a favorable position in so far as we need not promise the Arabs a merely ‘tolerable’ solution of the Jewish question in

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239 Ibid., vol. 9, 436.

Palestine but can with a good conscience make the Arabs any concession in this field." As can be seen, the OKW's words amount to nothing close to a detraction of "Barbarossa." But, it is notable that the branch, although not proposing an alternative to the East, was recognizing the Arab East's needs and potential.

Finally, one of the more fascinating documents relating to the interest of the German Army, Air Force, and Navy in pro-coup operations was drafted on 16 May. In it, the Head of the Foreign Ministry's Political Division "IM," Hans Kramarz, explains how the Wehrmacht and Luftwaffe "After first viewing an operation in Iraq with skepticism ... now realized the importance of such an operation ..." The memorandum mentions, most importantly, that "A decisive factor in this connection was the foreign minister's personal letter to the Reichsmarschall." Although no such letter from Ribbentrop to Goering has ever been found, and it is not clear as to why the military branches viewed an Iraqi campaign as so "important," one should find it significant that two figures, in Ribbentrop and Goering, who were highly skeptical of "Barbarossa," did find it easy to cooperate in the formation of a pro-coup operation. As far as the Navy and Army were concerned the following was envisaged:

The Army envisages sending a military mission consisting of several arms specialists and general staff officers. Gehrcke has made a proposal on this subject in telegram No. 26 and suggested General Felmy as head of that mission.

The Navy, in consultation with the Foreign Ministry, has instructed the cargo vessels lying in Bandhar, Iran, to attempt to enter the delta of the Shatt-al-Arab and then to scuttle themselves in order to hamper the flow

241 Ibid.

242 Ibid., no. 528.
of British supplies to Basra.  

So, if Hitler could not give any sizable endorsement to action in the eastern Mediterranean and the Arab East, leading figures in the German Navy, Air Force, and Army surely could.

Coming back to Ribbentrop, one might further conclude that the opportunity of including France in the Iraqi operation excited the foreign minister. Of course, Ribbentrop was quite fond of developing a Continental Coalition. Might he have viewed Iraq as an opportunity to resurrect the attempted alliance which had been scuttled back in late 1940? Hitler had turned away from closer relations between Vichy and Germany after Marshal Petain's dismissal of the pro-Axis Pierre Laval. Such a change in French leadership led to the opening of communications between the collaborationist government and both American and English governments. There were obvious tensions between Berlin and Vichy, but the chance of creating a joint Franco-German alliance made Ribbentrop believe that the French might "be prevailed upon . . . to declare war against England, to make the French navy available to us for the fight against England, and to give bases . . ." Much to the foreign minister's delight, a deal was struck by 8 May which affirmed the conditions for Franco-German collaboration during the coup. And, as stated earlier, the first flow of Vichy supplies crossed the Iraqi border on 13 May.

While meeting with Mussolini on 13 May, Ribbentrop took the opportunity to discuss the Iraqi situation. The foreign minister, thinking

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243 Ibid.
244 Warner, 103.
245 D.G.E.P., vol. XII, no. 144.
quite independently from Hitler voiced the following idea to the Duce: “if a sizable arms shipment reached Iraq, airborne troops could then be brought into the area, which could then with the material on hand advance against the English and from Iraq, in certain circumstances, they could attack Egypt from the east.”246

As Mussolini favored such a plan, he found Ribbentrop’s proposal worthy of consideration: “Iraq had to be helped in any case . . . for in this way a new front would be opened up against the English and a revolt not only of the Arabs, but also of a great number of Mohammedans would be started.”247 What is more, Mussolini was particularly convinced of the notion that “the possessions of this center of the British Empire with its oil wells might have an even more profound impact upon the British world position than a landing in the British Isles themselves.”248

The Italian leader, when meeting with Ribbentrop, was not aware of the 22 June start date for “Barbarossa,” a campaign which, on several occasions, Mussolini had admonished Hitler against waging.249 As far as Hitler’s opinion of a pincer move on Egypt was concerned, he, on 20 April, while meeting with Count Ciano at Münchenkirchen, quickly put to rest any idea of initiating an operation through Turkey and the Palestinian Coast on Egypt: “The possibility of attempting the operation by force can be ruled out. Independently of Turkish resistance, which would be considerable, the

246Ibid., no. 511.
247Ibid.
248Warner, 97.
distance would make any military operation uncertain and dangerous. Of course, in view of the mammoth geographic commitment demanded by "Barbarossa," the question of distance should not have been an issue for Hitler in grounding a move on Suez through Turkey. In any case, Hitler was resolved to move east, and the acute British fear of a pincer move was uncalled for.

The memoirs of the German Ambassador to Turkey Franz von Papen, not only lend further evidence to the seriousness of Ribbentrop, in regards to Iraq, but they also expose the distance which existed between the policy attitudes of the foreign minister and Hitler. Papen mentions the foreign minister's strong insistence that the German ambassador do what he could to loosen Turkey's regulation of war material traveling through its borders: "Ribbentrop was bombarding me with telegrams, insisting that I get the Turks to permit the passage of every sort of war material. Naturally, they declined, although they did allow the transport of petrol, which could not be defined exclusively as war material. I tried to get Ribbentrop to appreciate the Turkish position and disregarded his insistent demands to seek interviews with M. Saracoglu." When we compare the aggressive attitude of Ribbentrop relating to Turkey with that of Hitler's stark desinteressement evident is a wide divergence in what each man had intended for Turkey's role in the Axis effort.

It is also true that Hitler did not favor any act which might threaten the

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stability of the British Empire.\textsuperscript{252} A future alliance with Great Britain was fundamental to early Nazi ideology. As Hitler was to state in 1931, “We have no intention of destroying the British Empire. We have no objection to His Majesty’s flag flying over Suez, Singapore, and Hong Kong.”\textsuperscript{253} A more recent comment by General Franz von Halder, the Chief of the Army General Staff, on 21 May, 1940, noted what Hitler envisaged for Great Britain by stating that “We are seeking contact with Britain on the basis of partitioning the world.”\textsuperscript{254} Interestingly enough, an additional reason for Hitler’s indifference to Iraq rests within his aversion to conducting policy in concert with non-Aryan peoples. In \textit{Mein Kampf} Hitler believed that “As a folkish man, who appraises the value of men on a racial basis, I am prevented by mere knowledge of the racial inferiority of these so-called ‘oppressed nations’ from linking the destiny of my own with theirs.”\textsuperscript{255} Just months after the coup’s failure, and after the Japanese capture of Singapore, Hitler, in early 1942, predicted the loss of the Aryan influence in Australia and the Far East, and stated that impending rush of Japanese victories would mean “the loss of a whole continent, and one might regret it, for it’s the white race which is the loser.”\textsuperscript{256} Hitler’s Minister of Information Joseph Goebbels, on 10 May, added to Hitler’s Iraqi commitment by stating: “The Fuehrer does not think much


\textsuperscript{253}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{254}Franz Halder, \textit{War Journals}, vol. I (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1963), 308.


of the Arab's fighting capacity, and rightly so. They are not attuned to modern weaponry; they have neither the nerves nor the intelligence to use it."257

Grobba, in his memoirs, also cites both racial and strategic concerns in Hitler's desinteressement in the Arab East.258 In consistency with Hitler's policy of Englandpolitik, Grobba believed that the Fuehrer saw Germany's strategic interests better served through a policy which was not threatening to Great Britain's imperial position in the Middle East. Moreover, Grobba felt that the emergence of Vichy France as a prospective Axis partner further pushed Hitler away from supporting any anti-imperial insurrection. As far as race was concerned in influencing Hitlerian policy in the region, Grobba referred to Hitler as "preacher of the superiority of the Aryan race who did not want to see that the Semitic Arabs could be a very valuable source of support for us."

In any event, it is quite interesting that in a matter of days, Ribbentrop had made considerable contact with two prospective members of the proposed Continental Coalition, the foreign minister's most formidable alternative to a campaign against the Soviet Union. Again, because of this, one should not underrate the significance of Ribbentrop's attempt to bring these governments together into an anti-British operation, the only time during the war that it would be accomplished.

Despite his concessions to Ribbentrop and the tardy Directive No. 30, Hitler was not prepared to make use of the Iraqi coup. Perhaps Ribbentrop should have seen the proverbial "writing on the wall" when Hitler sent his only qualified airborne force, on 20 May, to take the British occupied island of


Crete, a significant accomplishment for the protection of the “soft underbelly” of Hitler’s Festung Europa.

What was Ribbentrop thinking? From every indication it appeared in the spring of 1941 that Hitler was more than bent on moving east. But, for the reasons we have cited, the foreign minister endeavored to press on and produce a sizable operation in the Middle East. If we assume that Ribbentrop was even vaguely interested in “Barbarossa,” would he have persisted to sanction actions which were clearly “pro-periphery,” and, as a result, anti-“Barbarossa”? In short, although it would seem doubtful to be wholly convinced of Ribbentrop’s attempted sabotage of “Barbarossa,” would it not seem even more careless to assume, despite the foreign minister’s actions to the contrary, that he was fully sold on the Russian invasion? Ribbentrop was a high-level Nazi official, whose intentions in Iraq ran contrary to those of Hitler, in this case, an invasion of the non-Aryan peoples of the east. What is more, the documents tell us that Ribbentrop’s intentions in the Middle East were not on a small scale. Would anyone in Berlin, in this case, be amenable to the launching of two major operations, each with separate intentions: one to hasten the destruction of the British Empire, and the other to force its peaceful capitulation? Granted, it has been established that it was intended, after the defeat of Russia, that German forces would indeed move into the Middle East. But, this was most likely contingent upon, again, the British Empire capitulating and becoming the Reich’s “junior partner.”

After the 30 May armistice in Baghdad, Germany was to cease further activity in Iraq. Furthermore, Ribbentrop endorsed “Barbarossa.” Despite this, an interesting epilogue to the Iraq venture, giving further indication to

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259 Hildebrand, 105.
the bizarre inclinations of Ribbentrop and others within the Foreign Office, came in Hitler's eventual exclusion of the ministry from participating in the governance of occupied Russian territory. Of particular note, the man chosen to head such a task was Alfred Rosenberg, an extreme Nazi ideologue and enemy of Ribbentrop. The foreign minister's participation in the Russian invasion went no further than the placement of a few of his ministry advisors and observers at Rosenberg's service. It is also telling that, in roughly a two year period, Hitler went from referring to Ribbentrop as "the next Bismarck," as he did at the time of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August, 1939, to viewing the foreign minister and his diplomatic retinue as nothing more than a group of "sluts." With total war with Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and soon the United States underway, there was simply little left for Ribbentrop to do. So, with the failure of Ribbentrop's Iraq policy, and the onset of "Barbarossa," the inevitable and tragic philosophical split of German foreign policy was complete—ideology had indeed won the day over Ribbentrop's twentieth century version of Realpolitik. Hurt, isolated, and even perhaps a bit angered, the foreign minister's frustrations during and after the Russian campaign are most aptly expressed in the following words from his memoirs:

I do not know who at that time persistently influenced Hitler against me and the Foreign Office, but it is a fact that after the beginning of the Russian war Hitler told Reich Minister Lammers that there was a war in the East, and in war the Foreign Office served no purpose until the moment of the conclusion of peace. This remark shows Hitler's attitude to the Foreign Office as a government department; he rejected, perhaps even hated it, and I was never able to alter his attitude. I need not explain

260 Bloch, 335.
262 Bloch, 335.
how difficult this often made things for me.263

The question most germane to Ribbentrop's intent during the spring of 1941, was whether or not the foreign minister's actions, on the eve of "Barbarossa," were compatible with what Hitler would have viewed as acceptable Nazi diplomatic behavior prior to a major offensive? Vigorous pre-coup diplomatic activity within the Foreign Office, substantial contact with proposed members of the Continental Coalition, the foreign minister's anti-"Barbarossa" sentiment, and the "tenor and timing" of the Foreign Office's conduct seem to indicate anything but an affirmative answer. Ribbentrop reveled in his diplomatic victory of August 1939. He had accomplished what many viewed as the impossible. For a moment in time, Ribbentrop was, at least to himself, a diplomat of Bismarckian dimension. The Nazi-Soviet pact suited his fickle, egotistical, and reactionary past. With this in mind, and considering his pre-"Barbarossa" actions, it simply does not seem possible that Ribbentrop would allow Hitler to fritter away the crowning achievement of his life without a fight. By many indications, Iraq could have been that fight.

263Ribbentrop, 163.
CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

Arab nationalism's general impotence, Germany's, or perhaps more appropriately, Hitler's disinterest, and Great Britain's necessity to act, comprised the formula for the Rashid Ali coup's outcome. As a prism of history, the coup exposed traits which were to dominate Axis and Allied policy for the duration of the war: Germany's future was to be guided or misguided by the instinct-driven will of Hitler which found culmination in the Fuehrer's race war, "Barbarossa"; conversely, despite further hardships (Dieppe, Singapore, 1942), Great Britain persisted to fight, and, what is more, found itself bolstered by American and Russian allies which enabled her to not only maintain its empire, but liberate Europe from Nazism.

It is most probable that if Hitler, during the spring and summer of 1941, had decided to move into the Middle East that he would have been able to take the region in a matter of months. In fact, the force needed, perhaps twenty to thirty divisions (armored and infantry), would have amounted to one-sixth of that assembled for "Barbarossa."264 This would have enabled Hitler to knock an already crippled England out of the war, while still being able to defend the eastern frontiers from the Soviet Union should the latter choose to breach the Nazi-Soviet Pact. This, for the reasons stated, would have seemed the rational thing to do. The Arab East, during the time of the

Baghdad coup, was highly susceptible to attack. If taken, it would have yielded an unquestionable number of strategic advantages. But, despite the fact that many leading Germans, including Ribbentrop, Goering, Raeder, and Assmann, coveted the idea of such a campaign, it was the will of Hitler which finally prevailed.

The Germans, at this time of the war, had much that was going their way. Berlin possessed impressive weaponry, a wave of momentum from the many victories it had claimed over the previous two years, and the luxury of choice; Great Britain and the Soviet Union were staggered by Germany’s European successes—Berlin was certainly in a position of dictating policy to London and Moscow rather than the other way around. The Germans, even after the Battle of Britain, had options: They could invade Russia, storm Gibraltar, or, in the eyes of many British experts as the most logical thing to do, initiate a pincer movement on Suez, and bring about the British Empire’s death knell. However, after months of shirking opportunity, Hitler finally chose to move east. Aptly enough, Kennedy mentions that “if the Germans had concentrated on the Middle East for the next few months, it is very doubtful whether we could have held it. But Hitler, with his Russian plans, was about to come to our aid, as he often did at critical moments of the war.”

What London did possess, however, was the Middle East and its two most vital commodities: the Suez Canal and massive oil stocks. In other words, Great Britain’s options were scaled-down to simply defending and keeping what was hers. Of course, it was the Baghdad coup which prompted London to view the region’s significance with a more serious eye. And, knowing what it did at the time of the coup, in as far as German intentions were
concerned, Whitehall was wise to the fact that it could not afford to be
tentative, and its effort in Iraq reflected as much.

Knowing that a German concentration of forces in the Middle East would
have probably resulted in an Axis victory, it is easy to understand why
German policy in the Eastern Mediterranean in the spring of 1941 is worthy of
so much criticism. Assuming that Hitler had been dissuaded from
"Barbarossa," and, as a result, opted for a drive into the Arab East, what might
have Germany gained? The most obvious advantage to be gained by an Axis
move south would have been the enormous amount of oil to be had through
the occupations of both Iraq and Persia. Germany would have also been in an
excellent position to flank, and, as a result, threaten Soviet oil fields in the
Caucasus. When we speak of oil, we are immediately exposing perhaps the
greatest Achilles' heel of the Axis side. Italy's ability to participate in Axis
operations had been severely curtailed after its navy's oil stocks ran out in
June 1941.266 And, as early as February 1941, the Italians were requesting
some 574,000 tons of oil in "supplementary requirement for the first half of
the year 1941."267 As the Italian Navy held a crucial role in the Axis attempt
to neutralize the Royal Navy's predominance in the Mediterranean, we can
then assume that the presence of new oil reserves would have eased the great
strain strapping Axis supply lines at this time. One might further conclude
that the extra oil lifted from the Middle East would have afforded Hitler the
enormous versatility and energy needed for a Russian campaign, assuming
that he would have eventually gotten around to one. Furthermore, in view
of the Suez Canal's significance, one can infer that an effective German pincer

266 Warner, 167.
267 D.G.F.P., vol XII, no. 19.
would have, at the very least, hindered the flow of communications and supplies from the east to the west. So, needless to say, an exploitation of the Baghdad coup could have easily changed the face of the war, as it would have afforded the Axis massive stocks of oil which would have revitalized the needed Italian Navy, and provided fuel for future Axis campaigns, of particular note, "Barbarossa." Not to mention, Axis victory in the Arab East would have isolated British possessions in East India, Singapore and East and South Africa.

In the realm of diplomacy, we must consider the resulting ramifications had Ribbentrop, through the coup, been able to strike an alliance with Vichy France. With this in mind, can one assume that Anglo-American forces participating in operation "Torch" of November 1942, would have experienced the same peaceful disembarkment, had Vichy been an active participant in the Axis cause? This, of course, would have had a sizable impact on the Anglo-American effort to break Axis power in north Africa and eventually southern Europe. "Torch" was crucial to the American effort to obtain a foothold in the European war. The operation was also pivotal in the Allied effort to allay Russian concerns over the seriousness of its western allies. So, with the Allies, in the first three to four years of the war, too weak to invade the continent, it was imperative that they, for reasons of public opinion and fundamental diplomacy, conduct "Torch." However, with all of north Africa in Axis hands, Anglo-American efforts to attain that crucial bridgehead would have been hindered.

Despite the strong probability of Axis success in the Middle East, the potential problems accompanying such a campaign are obvious. First,
Turkey, a vital land bridge into the Levant and Mesopotamia, persisted to remain attached to Great Britain through the Sabadad Pact of October 1939, a treaty which despite its questionable integrity, the Germans believed to be "a very real threat."²⁶⁸ The nature of the mutual assistance treaty, for much of the war, was hindered by Turkey's great desire to remain neutral. Moreover, Field Marshall Kurt von Brauchtisch, Commander-in-Chief of the German Army, felt that the OKW had no evidence to support the assumption that the Turks would not fight back if attacked. With this in mind, Brauchtisch believed that nothing short of five armored divisions, three motorized divisions and twelve infantry divisions, would be needed to secure Turkey and could not be mounted until 1942.²⁶⁹

Second, Germany, while moving south would have to keep in close consideration, the territorial sensitivities of the Soviet Union's Josef Stalin. As stated, a Middle Eastern campaign would have not only put into jeopardy the Soviet Union's southern flank, but it also would have threatened Russian oil reserves in the Caucasus. It was, after all, in November of 1940 that Ribbentrop had guaranteed to Soviet Foreign Minister Viacheslav Molotov a free Soviet hand in the Persian Gulf.²⁷⁰ Invading the Arab East would have presumably signaled an end to such good will, and, by virtue of this, a prima facie break in Russo-German relations. One can conjecture that, in Hitler's eyes, the resulting tension of a Middle Eastern campaign would have


²⁶⁹Warner, 162.

threatened the largely stable nature between Moscow and Berlin, something which Hitler viewed as desirable prior to an attack on the Soviet Union.

Although it is easy to postulate German victory in the Arab East an almost certainly, we cannot assume that the massive booty of oil which would have accompanied such a victory would have been an easy move from the Middle East to Axis forces in Europe or north Africa. Of particular consideration for Germany would have been the possibility of an English contingency plan for the capping or destruction of the region’s most crucial oil wells and pipelines, lest they be utilized by the Axis.271 We do know that the British War Cabinet did consider a contingency plan for the demolition of the Caucus oil fields a must, especially in the first months of “Barbarossa.”272

The story of the coup is, in essence, a story of dualities. For instance, it certainly meant something that during the revolt one side was winning the war while the other was on the verge of losing it. This notion goes quite a ways in explaining why the British government grasped the affair with urgency while Berlin paid it relatively little attention. Furthermore, a nice irony surfaces when one realizes that the greatest freedom of action was given to Ribbentrop of totalitarian Germany while the least was exhibited towards Wavell of democratic England. Be that as it may, it is clear that the will of each country’s respective leader would prevail in the end.

Accompanying our analysis of Ribbentrop’s “bizzare” Iraqi venture, a sort of dilemma arises. As much as we may concede that there is not enough evidence to confirm the intent of Ribbentrop to dissuade Hitler from “Barbarossa,” there certainly is enough information for us not to disregard

271 Bryant, 203.
272 Kennedy, 148.
such a possibility. Because of this, we should not regard the argument that Ribbentrop's actions in Iraq were of an anti-"Barbarossa" posture, as anything more than conjecture.

In addition to the primary policies of each government, we have also seen that alternative strategies were present: for Ribbentrop, Iraq represented a golden opportunity to bring down the British Empire, while, for Wavell, the coup appeared to be the "last straw" in a series of Axis triumphs which, to the general, seemed anything but irreparable. The latter viewed negotiated settlement as the safest option.

Did Wavell have any foundation to believe that the conduct of "Habforce" would foment pan-Arab elements into action? An immediate question to be counter posed might ask to what extent Iraq could be looked upon as a legitimate nation-state? In the same light, one might wonder how effectively the concept of nationalism could be applied to Iraq and other Middle Eastern states? The following words of King Faysal, spoken in 1933, may give some indication of Iraq's heterogeneous nature:

In Iraq there is still ... no Iraqi people, but unimaginable masses of human beings, devoid of any patriotic ideal, imbued with religious traditions, and absurdities, connected by no common tie, giving ear to evil, prone to anarchy, and perpetually ready to rise against any government whatsoever.273

So, Rashid Ali, in 1941, had to face much of the same that Faysal did in 1920--this polyglot, multi-ethnic, multi-religious land was what the Iraqi premier had to turn to in his appeal to revolt. An additional barrier to the conspirators in their nationalistic call was the tribal nature of much of Iraq's rural population. In this tribal framework, allegiances went no further than

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273 Simon, Iraq Between the Two World Wars, 3.
the local shaykh. Baghdad's efforts to assert some sort of centralized mode of rule over the tribes were made manifest in taxing, and conscription, two vital factors in the legitimization of any government seeking centralized rule.\textsuperscript{274}

But, seeing their role in the traditional tribal feudal order threatened, shaykhs, on several occasions, raised revolt against Baghdad.\textsuperscript{275} And as government reactions to the uprisings were often violent, it is easy to see how the already high degree of alienation between the two camps was only exacerbated. It is also important to emphasize that the doctrines of Arab nationalism could hardly "trickle-down" below the class posture of Iraq's urban-centered educated elite. There was really no way by which the government could communicate with the great mass of Iraqi tribesmen—in a socioeconomic sense, they lived worlds apart. Making matters worse, the rural population was plagued by a high rate of illiteracy. Sir Arnold Wilson offers corroboration: "These people are utterly unvocal, like all uneducated masses, and it is impossible to find out all what they think about government. We deal with them largely in mass, through their shaykhs, and the shaykh's view of government is an objectionable means of extracting money ..."\textsuperscript{276} Quite clearly, Baghdad was embroiled in a struggle between nationalism and localism, and until it could assert the former's primacy, any call to revolt would be hollow.

So, despite that fact that Wavell and Cornwallis might have feared it, and Grobba coveted it, Arab nationalism, in the author's opinion, was not a factor

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{275}Ibid., 237.
\item \textsuperscript{276}Ibid., 302-303.
\end{itemize}
which would have hindered or benefited the efforts of either side in the spring of 1941. What is more, upon beginning this work, the author found it easy to be drawn to the idea that festering at the heart of Great Britain's Iraqi policy was a concern for the volatility of Arab nationalism. It took little time, however, to discover that this thesis was false—rather than halting the spread of Arab national fervor, Great Britain's policy was driven, as we have seen, by its fear of an impending German pincer movement on Egypt and the Suez Canal, and the loss of its crucial oil reserves in Mesopotamia and Persia.

Wavell's performance prompted Churchill, after the coup, to remove the general from the Middle Eastern Command in favor of Auchinleck. The prime minister's audacity to intervene and take control of the Iraqi crisis quickly closed any doors which Arab nationalist and German alike might have viewed the coup as opening. This, in essence, aided Great Britain and her future allies in averting what could have been a very different war.
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