3

Turkey and Britain’s War in the Middle East, May 1941 to November 1942

During the first two years of the Second World War, Turkey had been peripheral to the British war effort in the Middle East. The spring and summer of 1941 saw the British paying closer attention to Turkey’s Middle Eastern credentials than at any time since the establishment of the republic. Faced with successive crises in Iraq and Syria, Churchill sought Turkish collaboration in eliminating pro-Axis regimes in both countries, but Eden and the FO recognised that the Turks saw both episodes as acid tests of British strength in the Middle East, and would not intervene on the Allied side until that strength had been demonstrated – against the Germans in North Africa, rather than the Italians or Vichy French. Anglo-Turkish antagonism over the occupation of Iran, in August 1941, reflected Turkish anxiety about collaboration between Britain and the Soviet Union, and was seen in Ankara as an ominous portent for recalcitrant neutrals in the region. Ultimately, however, the British (and the Russians) were in no position to undertake a similar operation in Turkey: in fact, the British relied on Turkish resistance to protect the ‘Northern Front’ of the Middle Eastern theatre, in the event of a Soviet collapse in the Caucasus which would have imperilled the entire British war effort in the Middle East.¹ This bogey haunted senior British officials throughout 1941 and 1942, and was taken altogether more seriously that Churchill’s war memoirs allow.

Iraq and Syria

The fall of the Balkans revived Turkey’s role as a neutral bulwark against the Axis, endorsed the previous autumn, before ‘Ultra’ appeared to reveal German ambitions in south-eastern Europe. By the end of April 1941, Britain had retreated to a policy which acquiesced in, and sought

N. Tamkin, *Britain, Turkey and the Soviet Union, 1940–45*  
© Nicholas Tamkin 2009
to preserve, Turkish neutrality in the war against Germany and Italy, although the possibility of local assistance against anti-British regimes in Iraq and Syria was not ruled out. Eden told the War Cabinet that Britain must hold Turkey as a benevolent neutral, building up its economic and war potential. ‘We should have to abandon all idea of a positive attitude by Turkey for the present...and would acquiesce...in the Turkish Government’s own view that for the present Turkey’s role should be passive politically as well as strategically.’ Churchill agreed. ‘If events should be so managed that the enemy forces did not march through Turkey, we should have derived a great benefit from the Turkish alliance.’ Eden told Parliament of Turkey’s ‘loyal friendship,’ and emphasised its service to the Allies ‘as a bulwark against fresh aggression in the Middle East.’

The crucible of the Middle Eastern theatre was Egypt, where the Middle East Command had been established in 1939. Faced with an Italian threat in the autumn of 1940, Egypt had been reinforced with tanks and artillery from Britain, and an invasion from Libya in mid-September had been successfully resisted. The British counteroffensive, in December and January, destroyed the Italian army in Egypt and Cyrenaica (eastern Libya), and liberated East Africa. A complete occupation of Libya was postponed by the diversion of resources to Greece, and by the arrival of German armoured divisions in North Africa. A German counter-attack under General Rommel cleared Cyrenaica in early April, but the British halted the Axis forces at the port of Tobruk. A British offensive in late April failed, as did another Axis assault on Tobruk. The British could not relieve Tobruk with forces barely recovered from campaigns in Greece and Crete, and others diverted to deal with crises in Iraq, where an anti-British coup occurred on 2 April, and Syria and Lebanon, where Vichy collaboration with Germany compelled a British-Free French invasion on 8 June.

The coup in Iraq occurred days before the German invasion of the Balkans. The Prime Minister, Rashid Ali al-Gaylani, had resigned in January 1941 after failing to gain support for his pro-Axis policy. The suppression of an anti-British military cabal prompted nationalist resistance, and a coup d’etat which restored Rashid Ali. A stand-off over Britain’s right to send troops to Palestine, via Iraq, ended in an attack on the RAF base at Habbaniya, near Baghdad, on 2 May. The Iraqis were assisted by Axis aircraft, refuelling in Syria and Lebanon, but a British relief force fought its way to Baghdad by 30 May.

The crisis on their frontier alarmed the Turks, not least because German air superiority in the Aegean meant that the principal British supply route to Turkey was via the port of Basra. Rather than see their