

PREAMBLE TO GALLIPOLI: BRITISH AMPHIBIOUS PLANNING IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN, 1906-1915

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Abstract

The Gallipoli-Dardanelles Campaign has been commonly presented as deriving from the stalemate on the Western Front, Russian difficulties and pressure, and political ambitions of British First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill. The article, based primarily on British archival documentation, argues that the factor of the earlier British amphibious perception vis-à-vis operations in the Eastern Mediterranean should be added to these causes, epitomized in early twentieth-century planning of amphibious operations along the Syria-Palestine coast, especially in the Haifa and Alexandretta regions.

Keywords: joint operations; amphibious operations; Taba Affair; Syria; Palestine; Alexandretta; Haifa; British army; Royal Navy; Ottoman Empire; military planning.

One hundred and eight years before March 1915, during the Napoleonic Wars, a Royal Navy squadron under the command of Admiral Sir John Thomas Duckworth was ordered for the first time to force the Dardanelles and impose British demands on the Sultan to sever the Ottoman alliance with Napoleonic France. Duckworth's fruitless passage under fire through the Straits and his withdrawal after reaching the Sea of Marmara in February 1807 was not to be tried again by British men-of-war for a century.¹ During the nineteenth century, London generally perceived the Sublime Porte not only a friendly power, but also as a buffer between its eastern territories on the one hand and the imperial rivals – Russia and France – on the other. In the context of the Great Game, the Cold War of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was considered a safety belt that secured the vital routes between England and its colonies and dominions in the east, first and foremost India, from interference by other Powers. Thus, British War Office and Admiralty thoughts regarding the feasibility of naval or amphibious operations in the Dardanelles, which surfaced from time to time, were aimed at Russia and coordinated with the Ottoman authorities. Such was the case, for example, during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, or when London became concerned about likely French-Russian aggression against Egypt in 1896.² Actual joint operations in other zones of the Eastern Mediterranean at that time were also either coordinated with Istanbul (such as in the 1840-41 Turco-British-Austrian coalition's intervention against the Egyptian army of Muhammad Ali and Ibrahim Ali in Lebanon and

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¹ W.D. Bird, "The Dardanelles, 1807 and 1915: a Strategic Parallel", *RUSI Journal*, 65, 457, 1920, pp. 119-126; John Grehanm, *British battles of the Napoleonic Wars*, London: Sword and Pen, 2013, pp. 19-25. On Italian botched attempt to penetrate the Dardanelles to sink Ottoman warships in Nagara Point (Nara Burnu) in 1912, during the Italo-Ottoman War: Charles Stephenson, *A Box of Sand: the Italo-Ottoman War, 1911-1912*, Ticehurst: Tattered Flag, 2014, pp.185-188.

² Peter Chasseaud and Peter Doyle, *Grasping Gallipoli: Terrain, Maps and failure at the Dardanelles, 1915*, Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2005, p. 22.

northern Palestine),³ or were not directed against it (such as the action against Napoleon's invading army in Egypt and Palestine in 1798-99 and the occupation of Egypt in 1882).⁴

The Taba Incident and Its Aftermath

The strategic climate in the Near East was transformed in 1906, when disagreement over the delineation of the border between the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula and Ottoman southern Palestine, known as the Taba Affair, deteriorated into the possibility of armed confrontation between the two empires and of an Ottoman military expedition against Egypt and the Suez Canal, held by Britain since 1882.⁵ For the first time in a century, the British viewed the Ottoman Empire as an adversary, and the territory of Syria-Palestine as a potential battlefield between the two armies. The crisis soon passed, solved by diplomatic means, but not British concern about a future conflict, and not their view, that

Great Britain in dealing with a Power like Turkey could not afford to stand merely upon the defensive. If we assumed such an attitude, our prestige in the east would be gone...We should be obliged to find a theatre of operations admitting of the exertion of military force, by which the Sultan could be brought to his senses.⁶

It seems therefore, that while *defence* was considered a purely military requirement, *offense* was perceived a political-imperial imperative.

Both the War Office and the Admiralty presented options for the temporary occupation of Ottoman territory: islands in the Aegean, sites along the coast of Asia Minor and Turkey-in-Europe, along the eastern Mediterranean coast (among them Alexandretta, Beirut, and Haifa), and even far-off objectives in Cyrenaica (Libya), the Persian Gulf, and the Red Sea. All targets involved amphibious operations, suitable for a naval power such as Britain.⁷

In fact, Alexandretta had already been suggested as a target during the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877, when the British considered the capture of strategic sites to thwart a possible Russian advance southwards. But the idea, according

³ W. B. Rowbotham, "Naval Operations on the Coast of Syria, 1840", *RUSI Journal*, 97, 588, 1952, pp. 566-578; Andrew Lambert, "Within Cannon Shot of Deep Water: the Syrian Campaign of 1840", *Seapower Ashore: 200 Years of Royal Navy Operations on Land*, ed. P. Hore, London: Chatham Publishing, 2000, pp. 79-95.

⁴ On British operations against French army and navy in the Eastern Mediterranean: Paul Strathern, *Napoleon in Egypt*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2007, p. 15 ff.; On British operations in Egypt: Donald Featherstone, *Tel El-Kebir 1882: Wolseley's Conquest of Egypt*, London, Osprey, 1993.

⁵ J.C. Hurewitz, "Egypt's Eastern Boundary: The Diplomatic Background of the 1906 Demarcation", *Egypt and Palestine: A Millennium of Association*, eds. A. Cohen and G. Baer, Jerusalem & New York: Yad Ben Zvi Institute & St. Martin's Press, 1984, pp. 269-283; John Burman, "British Strategic Interests versus Ottoman Sovereign Rights: New Perspectives on the Aqaba Crisis, 1906", *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 37, 2, 2009, pp. 275-292.

⁶ War Office, General Staff, 'Coercion of Turkey by Military Means, Introduction', April-May 1906, The National Archives, Kew [hereafter: TNA], WO 106/41 C3/14c.

⁷ War Office, General Staff, MO2, 'Coercion of the Sultan of Turkey', 27.4.1906, TNA, WO 106/41 C3/10.

to one historian, had been rejected due to the large number of troops that would be needed and the swampy ground there.⁸ It was now rejected once again in 1906. That left only two objectives considered worthy of further examination: Gallipoli and Haifa Bay.

Gallipoli was naturally a more tempting objective, but both the War Office and the Admiralty pointed to the great difficulties involved in implementing an amphibious operation against the straits.⁹ Accordingly, the Committee of Imperial Defence turned to examine the second option – landing on the Syria-Palestine coast.

As mentioned above, the Taba Affair was not the first time that this coast was targeted for a British joint operation. However, the new dimension in Taba was that while the previous actions had been coordinated with the Sultan, this time they were aimed against him.

A landing on the Syria-Palestine coast was considered most suitable to stop the Ottoman advance towards Egypt: the main north-south roads passed along it; it was a short distance from the then new Hijaz Railway (the Damascus-Mecca Ottoman strategic route in the East), and – in contrast with the Dardanelles – it was not fortified. The basic idea, therefore, was to land four or five infantry and one cavalry divisions, i.e., the greater part of the British field army at the time, in Haifa Bay and secure a solid base there. They would then advance eastwards, crossing the relatively flat country of Palestine there to the Jordan Valley and to the railway junction of Dara'a (today on the border of Syria and Jordan), where a railway branch from Haifa was linked with the main line of the Hijaz Railway, cutting Syria from Palestine. The expeditionary force was to remain in place until a political settlement would be reached.¹⁰

The War Office's planners believed that the landing of the expedition would not only check the Ottoman advance southwards towards the Egyptian border, but also motivate the Druze community in the region, whom they considered to be anti-Turkish and a meaningful fighting force, to join ranks. Moreover, they naively hoped that the operation would also encourage the outbreak of a rebellion in the Hijaz, Lebanon, and perhaps even in other parts of Greater Syria, as the tribesmen and the inhabitants would be

... [A]ssured by us that the object of our expedition was the final overthrow of Turkish misrule and the introduction of good Government into Syria and Palestine, [and] would be no doubt up in arms upon our side.¹¹

⁸ Andrekos Varnava, "Imperialism first, the war second: the British, an Armenian legion, and deliberations on where to attack the ottoman empire, November 1914-April 1915", *Historical Research* 87, 237, 2014 p. 547.

⁹ War Office, General Staff, MO1, 'The Question of military action in or near the Sinai Peninsula', 5.5.1906, TNA, WO 106/42 C3/13b; War Office, The Possibility of A Joint Naval and Military Attack upon the Dardanelles, Memorandum by the General Staff, 20.12.1906, TNA, CAB 4/2.

¹⁰ War Office, General Staff, MO1, 'Scheme for an attack on Haifa and Acre, and subsequent operations', 14.5.1906, TNA WO 106/1468.

¹¹ War Office, General Staff, 'War with Turkey, Operations in Syria: Operations in Syria should Turkey attack Egypt', 10.7.1907, TNA, WO 106/42/C3/2b.

As mentioned earlier, the potential threat of an Ottoman offensive against Egypt and the necessity of preventing it by military means remained fixed in the British perception. Soon, it was realized that the planners lacked up-to-date military and topographical intelligence for the operation and they turned for help to the almost retired former military attaché at Istanbul, Lieutenant-Colonel Francis Richard Maunsell.

Maunsell was considered by the military authorities as one “who probably knows more of this [Ottoman] country than any other Englishman.”¹² Fascinated by the Near East already in the late 1880s as a young officer in India, he began his travels and surveys in the eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Serving as a military vice-consul in Van and Bitlis at the beginning of the twentieth century, he embarked on topographical tasks to cartographically and verbally map the area there, gaining fame for his cartographic and surveying skills.¹³ During his tenure as military attaché he had extended his zones of interest, undertaking several journeys of intensive military-oriented reconnaissance in the region of the capital, including the Dardanelles and Gallipoli, and also in Syria and northern Palestine.¹⁴

Arriving in Palestine early in 1907, Maunsell carried out a six-week detailed reconnaissance along the planned avenues of invasion and advance. His military perspective findings were presented in a most fascinating 160-page confidential report on the topography, physical and human infrastructure, roads, settlements, and population of the region.¹⁵ In addition to providing up-to-date data on the intended area of operations, it assisted in convincing the planners to change the tactical objective of the entire operation from Dara'a to Damascus, the governmental, administrative, and spiritual heart of Greater Syria, as its occupation by the British, even temporarily, would, according to Maunsell and subsequently the planners at the Strategical Section of the General staff, be considered by the Ottomans and – no less important – by the local inhabitants a serious prestige blow to the Sultan.¹⁶ The report also strengthened the belief common among British decision-makers that the local population, mainly the minority groups, but no less the desert living Bedouin, detested the Turks and would not resist the expedition, or might even join the invaders.¹⁷ Parenthetically,

¹² Memorandum on the history of the plans to attack Syria, 24.11.1914, untitled and unsigned, TNA, CAB 17/71.

¹³ Yigal Sheffy and Yossi Ben-Artzi, *Occupying Haifa: British Intelligence and the Plans for the Occupation of Northern Palestine, 1907*, Jerusalem, Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, forthcoming [in Hebrew], Peter Collier, “Covert Mapping the Ottoman Empire: The Career of Francis Maunsell”, paper presented at the 26th International Cartographic Conference, 25-30 August 2013, Dresden.

¹⁴ War Office, Intelligence Department, ‘Reports on the Defences of Constantinople by Lieut-Colonel F.R. Maunsell’, [A-826] (September 1903), TNA, WO 33/284; War Office, General Staff, ‘Report on the Syrian Railways’ (A-1003), 1905, TNA, WO 33/335.

¹⁵ War Office, General Staff, ‘Reconnaissance of Syria from the Coast Eastwards’, June 1908, TNA, WO 33/456.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Part I, p. 22, ff.; War Office, General Staff, M01, ‘General Scheme for the invasion of Syria by an Expeditionary Force’, 13.6.1908, TNA, WO 106/43/C3/29.

¹⁷ ‘Reconnaissance of Syria from the Coast Eastwards’, Part I, pp. 9-14.

this belief followed the British into the World War and affected their policy and actions in the region, only to be proven wrong.

However, the updated plan of 1908 had neither ripened into detailed planning, nor towards actual preparations, as in the meantime the geo-strategic climate in which the British operated was substantially altered. First, London's political, military, and naval attention and resources were increasingly drawn to western Europe and the North Sea against Germany. Then, the 1908 Young Turks revolution, at first positively viewed by London, lessened the odds of a military confrontation. Finally, the Ottoman military performance in the Italo-Ottoman War and the Balkan Wars further convinced the British that there was no threat of a Turkish offensive against them. As a result, all plans for and deliberations about naval or military action against the Ottoman Empire were shelved, a step encapsulated by 1912 in the ruling of General John French, then the Chief of the Imperial General Staff: "the remoter possibility of an attack on Egypt ought not to occupy the time of the General Staff."¹⁸

Alexandretta Project, August 1914–February 1915

Four years later, British amphibious planning in the Mediterranean resurfaced, this time immediately after the outbreak of the Great War in Europe in August 1914, three months before the Ottomans joined in. As the well-researched and to some extent still controversial issue of the origins of the Dardanelles Campaign itself is outside the scope of this article, it examines only the deliberations about joint operations along the Syria-Palestine coast alone. Until early in February 1915 these operations were considered major independent actions important in their own right, and only gradually were they presented as mere deceptive operations to divert attention from Gallipoli.

The scheme for the seizure of Alexandretta to cut the strategic railway to Syria was previously proposed to the British early in 1914 by the Greek general staff, when a Greek-Turkish war seemed imminent, and was part of a larger joint operation planning that included a landing in the area of Izmir as well. The Greek scheme was revived in August 1914, several days after the arrival of the German battle-cruiser *Goeben* and the cruiser *Breslau* to the Bosphorus, and its Alexandretta part was designed to stop Arab reinforcements and Mesopotamian cereals from reaching Turkey.¹⁹ British First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill and War Secretary Lord Kitchener appointed a joint planning group to examine the idea, but the latter soon reached the conclusion that the operation's chances of success were almost nil.²⁰ Even if their verdict would have been different, the result would still be the same, as Greece's fear of Bulgarian aggression, in addition to the attitude of her pro-German King Constantine, finally blocked the attempt to join the Allies.

¹⁸ French's assertion is referred to in 'Note on the Defence of Egypt', 24.11.1914, TNA, CAB 17/71.

¹⁹ Zisis Fotakis, *Greek Naval Strategy and Policy, 1910-1919*, Abingdon: Routledge 2005, pp. 98-99.

²⁰ Barry Hunt, *Sailor Scholar: Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond, 1871-1946*, Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press 1982, pp. 47-9; Diary entry, 26.9.1914, Papers of Admiral Sir Herbert W. Richmond, RIC/1/10, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.

While the Gallipoli-Dardanelles operations should be viewed in the broad context of aiding Russia, defending Serbia, encouraging Italy and the Balkan states to join the Entente, and seeking an alternative strategy to the stalemate on the Western Front, the campaign along the Syria-Palestine coast is to be considered primarily in the limited context of the defence of Egypt. Therefore, at the same time that Gallipoli was temporarily removed from the agenda, the War Office and the Admiralty continued to study joint operations along the eastern coast during September and October, including the issue of providing military support to the Maronite and Armenian minorities near the coast to encourage them to launch guerilla warfare during the landing.

By October, the Admiralty's Operations Division proposed a large-scale operation that would incorporate the landing of a force on the Adana coast to sabotage the nearby Anatolian railway, and an amphibious action in Haifa Bay, which would advance to Dara'a and destroy the railway junction there. Alternatively, the plan envisioned the Haifa landing to be only a diversion intended to draw Ottoman forces to this region instead of advancing southwards. Upon completion of their mission, the British troops would then embark and sail towards another threatening objective, such as Tripoli or Beirut. Thus "The Turks would remain uncertain as to where the next attack is to be launched, and the Damascus garrison fully employed to watch the coast."²¹

Admiral William Richmond, the Admiralty's Assistant Director of Operations at the time and probably the mastermind behind the plan, wrote in his diary:

We can land a force in Haifa in a day or two and from that moment the entire Syrian coast would be in shambles... I am certain the 3,000 men can fix 30,000 and Egypt would be safe as a church.²²

While the naval-military establishment continued its theoretical deliberations, the Ottoman Navy's bombardment of the Russian coast brought the Middle East into the war, increasing the threat against Egypt, which naturally had an impact on the amphibious planning. Late in November, the option of a joint operation against the Ottomans was discussed by the British War Council (the supreme body for the conduct of the war). On 25 November Churchill raised the idea of such an operation against Gallipoli as the ideal method to defend Egypt, but admitted that lack of available troops prevented it from being carried out. He then suggested adopting the Admiralty's pre-war plan and under a feint at Gallipoli, conveying the impression that the British intended to land there, to actually land in Haifa or somewhere else along the Syrian coast in order to preempt the Ottoman invasion of Egypt.²³ Kitchener, opposed an immediate decision, explaining that the troops in Egypt were not yet ready and, even more so, as he "felt no anxiety about Egypt and Suez Canal."²⁴ However, he also

²¹ Richmond to DOD (Director of Operations Division, Admiralty), handwritten and typed memoranda, n.d., but probably in late October-early November 1914, TNA, ADM 137/97.

²² Arthur J. Marder, *Portrait of an Admiral: the Life and Papers of Sir Herbert Richmond*, Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 1952, pp. 122-23.

²³ 'Secretary's Notes of Meeting of War Council, November 25, 1914', 25.11.1914, TNA, CAB 42/1/4.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

asserted that should the relevancy of executing such an operation increase, it should be carried out in the Alexandretta region. This was the first time that the Alexandretta Project was formally placed on the agenda.

However, the General Staff opposed any offensive action on the Syrian coast. To its mind, a Haifa landing might indeed forestall the Ottoman attack on Egypt, but its effect would last only as long as the expeditionary force stayed in the area. That would mean that the force should remain in the Middle East for the entire duration of the war, which considerably reduced the fighting force in the main theatre – the Western Front. The alternative, according to a General Staff paper, was to carry out small demonstrations against towns like Jaffa, Haifa, Tripoli, or Alexandretta, as “The truth is that nobody likes the idea of sitting idle, but no effective offensive operation seems practical, and the game is not worth the candle.”²⁵

Yet Kitchener seemed to fall in love with the Alexandretta scheme. To his credit, it should be noted that while Churchill, for his part, increasingly pressed during December and January for an operation in the Dardanelles, developing his famous “by-ships-alone” concept, Kitchener correctly assessed that considerable numbers of troops would be required, and those were unavailable at that time. As an interim alternative, early in January he suggested a stopgap minor operation in Alexandretta that, in his opinion, would strike an effective blow at the Turkish communications with Syria. This operation would require about 30–50,000 troops, in comparison with the 150,000 he considered necessary for Gallipoli. But even these he refused to allocate, expecting a major German offensive in the west.²⁶ Kitchener therefore instructed General Sir John Maxwell, General Officer Commanding Egypt, to examine the idea of allocating 5,000 troops of the Australian and New Zealand Corps (ANZAC), which was temporarily stationed and training at that time in Egypt, on its way to France.²⁷ The Egyptian Command, which received daily updated intelligence on the emergence of the expected Ottoman offensive, followed his instruction with great enthusiasm. Lieutenant-General (later Field Marshal) Sir William Birdwood, commander of the Anzacs, prepared a semi-detailed operational plan for the landing and occupation of the entire Alexandretta region, including the Bailan Pass, the crucial bottleneck on the way to Aleppo (Homs). At first it stuck to Kitchener’s instructions and proposed to land only one brigade to seize Alexandretta alone, but after reviewing the situation and the intended area of operation more closely Birdwood reached the conclusion that to fulfill his mission he should expand the plan to push inland and even to capture Aleppo. Such a task should involve the whole 1st Australian Division and probably his entire Corps.²⁸ The Egyptian Intelligence Department prepared detailed summaries on the Alexandretta-Ayas Bay region, and an extensive effort was made to gain up-to-date intelligence,

²⁵ War Office, Director of Military Operations to Chief of Imperial General Staff, 28.11.1914, TNA WO 106/1469.

²⁶ Minutes of Meeting of War Council, January 8, 8.1.1914, TNA, CAB 42/1/12.

²⁷ Birdwood to [General Sir Gerald] Ellison. 13.4.1924, TNA, WO 161/84.

²⁸ *Ibid*; Birdwood to Kitchener, 23.1.1915, TNA, PRO 30/57/61 - WL 2 pp. 10-12.

including ground observation by naval units, air reconnaissance by seaplanes, and debriefing and interrogation of refugees, prisoners, and travelers.²⁹

By mid-January the Alexandretta scheme was alive and kicking, as can be learned from Churchill's letter to Kitchener, in which he proposed the possibility of presenting the Dardanelles operation – if it would fail – as a mere demonstration to cover the Alexandretta landing.³⁰ The British also approached the French naval authorities to associate them with the two plans – the Dardanelles and Alexandretta, only to receive a cold – not to say frozen – shoulder from the French with regard to Alexandretta.³¹ Paris looked upon the region as its legitimate sphere of imperial influence and – unable to allocate troops for such a landing – rejected any purely British action.

Although the preparations in Egypt and the talks in London regarding Alexandretta continued until mid-March, and even though Kitchener at least outwardly continued to support the operation (there are indications that he was reluctant to commit a large force such as the entire ANZAC Corps to the operation) up to the eve of the Dardanelles naval operation on 18 March, nevertheless the French veto and the War Council's decision of 16 February to allocate army troops, including the Anzacs, to the Dardanelles enterprise, terminated the scheme for all practical purposes.³² Thus, by mid-February the discussions about landing in Alexandretta and Haifa were no longer conducted in connection with immediate strategic gains, but rather either in association with their being tactical feints for the genuine operation in the Dardanelles, or in linkage with imperial aims in principle, such as the future occupation of Mesopotamia.

A concluding note: a postwar school of thought asserted that by giving up the Alexandretta scheme, the British missed a golden opportunity to inflict a mortal blow on the Ottomans. It claimed that a landing against the feeble defence there early in 1915 could have changed the entire setup of the Middle East, and might even have made the Gallipoli, Mesopotamia, and Palestine campaigns redundant, or at best minor affairs.³³ Whether such a claim is indeed valid is still an open question.

²⁹ Yigal Sheffy, *British Military Intelligence in the Palestine Campaign 1914-1918*, London: Frank Cass, 1998, pp. 78-83, ff.

³⁰ Churchill to Kitchener, 20.1.1915, TNA, PRO 30/57/72 -WQ 38.

³¹ Sir Edward Grey [British Foreign Secretary] to Lord Francis Bertie [British Ambassador at Paris] 9.1.15, FO 371/2480/2506/5035; Marder, *Portrait of an Admiral*, p. 136; Varnava, "Imperialism first", p. 550.

³² Minutes of Meeting of War Council, 16 February, 16.2.1915, TNA, CAB 42/1/35.

³³ Gerald Ellison, *The Perils of Amateur Strategy: as exemplified by the attack on the Dardanelles Fortress in 1915*, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1926, pp. 24-30; Varnava, pp. 547-48.

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