

Army was concerned, I estimated that to defend the whole of the Middle East including Persia and Iraq I required five armoured and seventeen infantry divisions. It now appeared that we could count on no more than three and a half armoured and thirteen infantry divisions and were consequently faced with a deficiency of twenty-five per cent. of our minimum requirements. The Royal Air Force, it appeared, would be twenty squadrons short of the eighty-two needed. Our naval forces also needed strengthening. These estimates were based on the assumption that we might have to meet an attack on the Northern Front in the spring, that we should be able to retain our hold on Cyrenaica, and that the enemy would be incapable of resuming the offensive on a large scale in the west.

His Majesty's Government agreed that the defeat of Germany must remain our primary object and that, consequently, no more of our forces should be diverted for the moment than were necessary to hold the Japanese. Nevertheless it was imperative to call upon the Middle East to provide six infantry divisions and one armoured brigade in all out of existing resources and out of expected reinforcements. We were asked to despatch the 6th and 7th Australian Divisions immediately. Our losses and expectations would be made good as soon as possible.

Within a very few days I was warned by the Chiefs of Staff that Malta, a vital bastion of the Middle East, was also in acute danger, and I was ordered to send an anti-aircraft regiment and two squadrons of tanks to repel an expected attack. These were despatched, but only half of them reached the island. The attack, fortunately, failed to materialise.

The Middle East Defence Committee naturally accepted the withdrawal of troops and air forces as inevitable. They did, however, feel it necessary to stress that the situation in Cyrenaica was still delicate and would continue so until we had secured a position in the Agheila marshes. Troop movements to the Far East should not be allowed to interfere with the attainment of that object, otherwise we should be compelled to retire to the frontier. In the event, the withdrawal of troops did not affect the operations which took place in Western Cyrenaica at the end of January.

I did, however, consider that it might be prudent to abandon the project of invading Tripolitania for the time being. Having once secured El Agheila and Marada, I felt confident of holding Cyrenaica and of being in an advantageous position to launch an offensive at some future date. I, therefore, consulted the Prime Minister on this point.

The Prime Minister's reply conveyed a warning that the remaining Australian Division might be required, but at the same time it held out definite prospects that some at least of our losses would be made good as soon as shipping could be provided. The United States Government was fully impressed with the idea that Germany was the chief opponent, and there was no intention of sacrificing any profitable operation against Germany for the sake of an offensive in the Far East, except with the limited object of making Malaya secure. The President was even considering basing an American army on the ports of the Persian Gulf and participating in an operation to secure Tunisia with or without the connivance

of the Vichy Government. We were, therefore, to pursue our preparations for carrying the war into Tripolitania.

The promises that our losses would be made good were reassuring, but it seemed practically certain that the Germans would resume their Russian campaign in the spring and might be expected to attack Northern Persia in the middle of May. It was also possible, though much less likely, that they might invade Turkey from the west in which case we should have to be prepared to meet an attack six weeks earlier. Since we had allotted a minimum of troops to the Western Front in estimating our defence requirements, every withdrawal of troops for the Far East was effected at the expense of the Northern Front and it became necessary drastically to revise our plans for the defence of this flank.

The defence of Syria, Iraq and Persia from the north had always been regarded as one problem, with Cyprus as an essential outpost on the western flank. In September, 1941, I had arranged with General Wavell for India and the Middle East to collaborate in planning. On the 5th January, 1942, Iraq and Persia passed under my command, and Lieutenant-General E. P. Quinan's forces became the Tenth Army corresponding to General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson's Ninth Army in Syria.

In estimating the forces required to defend this thousand mile front we had two objects; first to keep the enemy as far as possible from our bases and oilfields in Egypt and at the head of the Persian Gulf, and secondly to be able to support Turkey if she were attacked. Four armoured and fifteen infantry divisions were needed and in December we could count on no more than two and a half armoured and eleven infantry divisions, after allowing only one armoured and two infantry divisions for the Western Front. Moreover there was a serious shortage of anti-aircraft artillery.

After the two Australian divisions had been withdrawn with their full complement of administrative units and after taking into account the prospects of equipment being diverted to the Far East, the situation became much worse.* It now seemed that only nine infantry divisions would be available for the Northern Front. Moreover an acute shortage of tanks, armoured cars and motor transport vehicles would prevent us making even these fully mobile. It was obvious that we could not hope to fight the enemy well forward, but must meet him much further back where the ground favoured defence by weak forces.

These decisions were as distasteful to Admiral Cunningham and Air Chief Marshal Tedder as they were to me; but they agreed that in the circumstances there was no alternative, particularly as our air forces were not strong enough to offset the weakness of our armies.

I at once issued new instructions for the defence of the Northern Front. At the same time the Middle East Defence Committee took steps to guard against a possible failure of the French civil administration in Syria in the event of attack, or threat of attack. On 22nd January I discussed the new policy with Generals Wilson and Quinan at Haifa, and,

* Note on "Possible Commitments in the Spring," 20th Jan. 1942—Appendix 7.