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DESPATCH ON THE PERSIA AND IRAQ COMMAND COVERING THE PERIOD 21ST AUGUST, 1942, TO 17TH FEBRUARY, 1943.

The following Despatch was submitted to the Secretary of State for War on 8th April, 1943, by GENERAL SIR H. MAITLAND WILSON, G.B.E., K.C.B., D.S.O., Commander-in-Chief, Persia and Iraq Command.

FORMATION OF PERSIA AND IRAQ COMMAND.

1. The initial successes gained by the Germans during the summer of 1942 in their South Russian offensive made it necessary to take account of the possibility that they might succeed in occupying the whole of Caucasia, and later of undertaking an invasion of Persia.

Simultaneously their advance into Egypt not only denied to the Commander-in-Chief Middle East, for the time, the freedom to move forces rapidly from Egypt to Persia—the basis of previous plans for the defence of the latter country—but led also to the withdrawal from Tenth Army of troops, equipment and transport to reinforce the Eighth Army in Egypt.

Early in August, 1942, it was estimated, by the War Office and by General Headquarters Middle East, that in the circumstances most favourable to them the Germans might succeed in reaching the River Araxes in North Persia by late October. Unless therefore immediate steps had been taken to strengthen the defence of Persia, the enemy might have been allowed an opportunity to follow up success in the Caucasus by striking at the oil fields and installations at the head of the Persian Gulf; and on the security of these the Allied war effort in the Middle East, India and the Far East largely depended.

Routes for delivery of material aid to Russia to assist her to withstand the German advance in South Russia were already in operation but were capable of considerable development.

The decision to create, in Persia and Iraq, a separate Command directly under the War

Office was made in August, 1942, during the visit to the Middle East of the Prime Minister and Chief of the Imperial General Staff. I took up my appointment as Commander-in-Chief on 21st August; General Headquarters opened in Baghdad on 15th September, 1942.

My tasks, in order of priority, were as follows:—

First: To secure at all costs from land and air attack the oil fields and oil installations in Persia and Iraq.

Second: To ensure the transport from the Persian Gulf ports of supplies to Russia to the maximum extent possible without prejudicing my primary task.

In carrying out my first task it would obviously have been preferable for British forces—Army and Royal Air Force—to have given direct assistance to the Russian defence in the Caucasus. However, for administrative reasons, due to great distances and lack of communications, the strength of the forces which could have been utilized in this way would have been insufficient to have any appreciable influence upon the course of operations. Furthermore the unwillingness of the Russians to accept this form of assistance rendered such a course impracticable.

Operations to carry out my primary task could not therefore become necessary, unless the Russian defence in the Caucasus failed. My primary and secondary tasks were thus somewhat in conflict; the former called for intensive administrative preparation of the Persian lines of communication, which could only be carried out at the cost of curtailing deliveries to the Russians of supplies so urgently needed to sustain their defensive campaign.