The waters around the home islands remained the Royal Navy's most pressing concern, but the security of the Suez Canal was almost as important, for several reasons. Obviously, the loss of the canal would greatly lengthen British sea communications with Persia, India, Australia, and other points east. The British also feared that the loss of the canal might lead to the loss of all of Egypt. Although Egypt was far less important to the British Empire than India, British leaders understood that the Ottoman reconquest of Egypt would serve as a major propaganda victory in Ottoman attempts to define the war as a pan-Islamic struggle against the Christian allies. The possibility of an Islamic revolt in India haunted British planners and gave the kaiser another motivation for supporting the Ottoman Empire. In one of his less coherent tirades, the kaiser had ranted, "Our consuls in Turkey and India, our agents, etc., must rouse the whole Moslem world into wild rebellion . . . ; if we are going to shed our blood, then England must at least lose India."[11]

The link between India and Egypt grew even closer when the British decided to use Indian soldiers to guard the Suez Canal region. Although occupied by Great Britain, by law Egypt remained an Ottoman province under the religious guidance of the Turkish sultan. The Egyptian Khedive, Abbas Himli II, had openly pro-Ottoman sympathies and had been in Constantinople when the war began. The British forced his deposition in favor of his more pliant uncle and declared martial law in November 1914. Henry McMahon, who replaced Kitchener as High Commissioner for Egypt when the latter became Secretary of State for War, decided against using Egyptians for the defense of Suez because of their presumed pro-Ottoman sentiments. Two Indian infantry divisions thus formed the backbone of Britain's Egyptian strategy, which established the canal itself as the main line of defense, surrendering Sinai to the Ottomans.

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In February 1915 the Ottomans attacked the canal, hoping to seize Suez and inspire a revolt of Egyptians against the British. To avoid gunfire from Royal Navy warships, the Ottomans aimed their assault at the center of the canal. Two companies of Ottoman soldiers crossed the canal but could not hold their positions. Significantly, no uprising occurred inside Egypt. The offensive, which the British read as little more than a raid, had failed. Despite the ease with which they had defended the canal, the British soon increased the force defending it to 150,000 men, who were lavishly supplied in contrast to their Ottoman foes.

Throughout 1915, frustrations at Gallipoli led the British to a renewed respect for their Ottoman foes and a determination not only to hold Suez, but also to protect it by advancing into the Sinai. The British improved rail lines in the region and dug more water wells to support an offensive. They also moved gunboats into the canal itself. To organize this force, which had grown to twelve divisions by January 1916, Kitchener sent General Sir Archibald Murray, a veteran of British colonial operations worldwide and the former chief of staff to Sir John French. Murray quickly set to work organizing the Egyptian theater for both the defense of the canal and an offensive as far as Palestine and Gaza.

Simultaneously, Ottoman successes at Gallipoli led to Turkish confidence that their soldiers could take the canal with a fresh effort. Throughout the year, the Ottomans improved their own rail and road links from the front line to the Ottoman Fourth Army headquarters at Beersheba. In April 1916 the Ottomans stopped a British advance on the oasis of Qatiya, east of the canal. In August, they advanced close enough to the canal to damage it with artillery fire, but Murray drove them back at the cost of 16,000 Ottoman casualties. The British, who had suffered only 1,500 casualties, decided not to pursue because of a lack of drinking water, a major factor during the hot Sinai summer.

To the east, the Ottomans formed a new Sixth Army to hold off a British advance from Basra in Mesopotamia. Its commander

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Australian soldiers on camels as they train in Libya for the Palestine campaign. Australian Light Horse regiments played a critical role in the fighting in the Middle East. (Australian War Memorial, negative no. H12853)

was a seventy-two-year-old Prussian field marshal, Colmar von der Goltz. Formerly the military governor of occupied Belgium, von der Goltz had been reassigned to Constantinople after having fallen from favor with the German political leaders, who had grown frustrated at what they saw as his soft treatment of the Belgians. As commander of the Sixth Army, he dreamed of leading an Ottoman invasion from Mesopotamia into Persia and perhaps even into the crown jewel of the British empire, India.

First, however, von der Goltz had to deal with a combined British and Indian force led by Sir Charles Townshend that by July 1915 had entered the Mesopotamian cities of Nasiriya on the Euphrates and Amara on the Tigris. From Amara, Townshend moved north 150 miles to Kut, which he planned to use as his

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main base for an offensive on Baghdad, just 80 miles further up the Tigris River. Ottoman General Nurettin Pasha set up his defense 20 miles south of Baghdad, at Ctesiphon. Protecting his right flank by anchoring it on the river, Nurettin established two solid defensive lines with 20,000 troops, many of them from first-rate Ottoman units.[12] Outnumbered, in hostile territory, and without hope of reinforcement, Townshend nevertheless attacked, counting on Ottoman morale to break as it had at Nasiriya. By the end of November, the British and Indian force had succeeded in seizing the Ottoman first line, but could not break through the second line. Ottoman morale held despite suffering twice the number of casualties that the British had taken.

Unable to take Baghdad, Townshend decided to withdraw to his base at Kut, which he reached on December 3. With his back to the Tigris River, Townshend had a garrison of 11,600 British and Indian soldiers, 3,300 noncombatants, and 7,000 locals under his care. He estimated that his ammunition and food could last sixty days. His forces easily defeated a Christmas Eve attack by Nurettin's forces, leaving Townshend confident in his ability to withstand the Ottomans until relief arrived. The Ottomans, however, rapidly surrounded the city and starved the garrison out while additional forces stopped three British efforts to relieve the garrison. In one case, the Ottomans stopped a ship carrying 270,000 tons of food by stretching a metal chain across the Tigris River. Two Ottoman divisions wore out the Kut defenders by constantly forcing them to respond to feigned attacks.

Townshend's two-month food supply quickly dwindled. The men held on into April, eating their horses and any other unfortunate animals living in Kut. Disease soon ravaged the camp, with cholera (which also affected the besiegers, killing von der Goltz in April) weakening the men even further. The British government, desperate to avoid the humiliation of a mass surrender, offered the Ottomans £2 million in gold in exchange for the garrison's safe re-

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lease. The British also promised that, if released, none of the men from Kut would be returned to military service against Turkey. The Ottomans refused.

Finally, on April 29, 1916, Townshend surrendered along with 2,591 British and 6,988 Indian soldiers. Of that group, more than half died either en route to prisoner of war camps or in Ottoman captivity. Townshend was one of the survivors. Instead of sending him to a prison camp, the Ottomans established him in a villa on the island of Prinkipo near Constantinople. They afforded him excellent treatment and even allowed him to go hunting. The contrast between his comfortable existence and the wretched experience of those under his command forever haunted Townshend, who had signed what was then the largest capitulation in British history.

Unable to achieve rapid military decisions and faced with unexpected Ottoman resolve, the British turned to diplomacy and intrigue. As the Germans were attempting to instigate an Islamic revolt in India and Egypt, the British were attempting to spark an Islamic revolt in Arabia. While neither produced results that quite matched their authors' expectations, the British variant proved to be significantly more effective. For Britain, an Arab revolt in the land of the Islamic holy cities would undermine the Ottoman caliph's calls for jihad, thereby splitting the Islamic world. It might also offer a chance to create a British-influenced Arab empire to complement the one Britain already had in India. To Kitchener, an old Egypt and Sudan veteran, the plan had particular appeal.

Even before the war, Kitchener had been engaged in conversations with Emir Abdullah ibn-Hussein, second son of the Sharif of Mecca, who held the title of King of the Hejaz (roughly corresponding to western Arabia). The Hussein family boasted lineage to the prophet Mohammed and therefore had the figurative power to offer a rival Islamic voice to the Ottomans.[13] The family also resented Young Turk attempts to suppress Arab culture and further Turkish control of Arab territories, the latter symbolized by the

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construction of the Hejaz railroad (largely financed with German money), which enabled the Ottomans to move soldiers into Arab lands more rapidly. Accordingly, the Husseins did not support the Ottoman call for jihad in November 1914, although they stopped well short of declaring support for the Allies.

Throughout the war's early months, Sharif Hussein learned of the pro-independence sentiments of many Arab officers inside the Ottoman army. In July 1915, he sent McMahon a letter indicating his willingness to initiate an Arab revolt if the British agreed to support the independence of an Arab state under the Husseins at the end of the war. McMahon agreed, although he was careful to leave the exact borders of future Arab lands vague. Sufficient to secure Hussein's support, McMahon's letter later caused great confusion when British and Arab understandings of the borders conflicted. The Hussein-McMahon agreement also contradicted the 1917 Balfour Declaration, in which the British government promised to support a Jewish homeland in Palestine. To complicate matters even further, the British recognized Hussein's rival, Ibn Saud, as ruler of eastern Arabia, and signed the Sykes-Picot Agreement, a secret pact with France that would divide most of the Ottoman Empire's Arab lands between France and Britain.

Unsure of Britain's trustworthiness, Hussein hesitated to call for an Arab revolt until the June 1916 Ottoman dispatch of troops to the garrison in the Arabian city of Medina. Hussein and his eldest son, Emir Faisal, reacted by leading an attack on the Hejaz railway and isolating Medina. The Arab revolt had begun. A mercurial British officer who spoke fluent Arabic and had, according to his British colleagues, "gone native," arrived as a liaison officer to the Arabs in October 1916. T. E. Lawrence ("Lawrence of Arabia") quickly identified Faisal as the most promising of the Arab leaders. It was the start of a relationship that eventually took Lawrence to the Paris Peace Conference as Faisal's advisor.

The Medina garrison held out despite the revolt, but Arab forces, 50,000 strong, seized the holy city of Mecca and three

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Red Sea ports within a month. The British provided arms and Royal Navy transports across the Red Sea to facilitate Arab efforts. Faisal, with Lawrence by his side, provided inspired leadership and proved to have an aptitude for guerrilla warfare. The Arabs cut rail lines, distracted thousands of Ottoman soldiers, and made a British offensive into Sinai possible. In August 1917, 2,000 Arabs entered Aqaba, a key Red Sea port, marking a dramatic turning point in the Arab revolt.

Lawrence then rode across the Sinai, arriving in Cairo to report on the capture of Aqaba and the larger success of the Arab revolt. There he learned of the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement, which threatened to deny Arab independence after the war. Meeting up with Faisal again, Lawrence urged Arab forces to push further and harder, hoping that Britain and France would not be able to deny the Arabs the independence of lands already in their possession. Damascus, under the French zone according to Sykes-Picot, quickly became the Arab goal. In October 1918, just before the end of the war, Arab forces entered the city, adding more confusion to an already complicated postwar picture in the Middle East.

The British made many contradictory and confusing promises in order to win the war, and those promises later proved to have many unforeseen complications; but at the time that the Arab revolt began, the British moves seemed to be paying enormous dividends. The British had been preparing for a general offensive into Sinai, building 140 miles of railroads and 15 miles of water lines per month.[14] In March 1917, as a renewed British offensive in Mesopotamia finally seized Baghdad, the British attacked into Gaza. The British enjoyed initial success, but failed to follow it up. A second attack in April involved tanks, gas, and naval gunfire support, but it too failed, with 6,400 British casualties.

The First and Second Battles of Gaza led to important changes on both sides. The British replaced Murray with General Edmund Allenby, whose failures on the western front had led to what he

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considered a demotion to a backwater front. British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, who had grown frustrated with the stalemate on the western front, told the temperamental Allenby that he did not see Palestine as a minor theater. The prime minister informed Allenby that he would support a large-scale offensive in Palestine, but he expected Jerusalem to be in British hands by Christmas. Lloyd George made good his promise by sending tanks, airplanes, and reinforcements.

British goals in Palestine went beyond merely delivering a battlefield defeat to the Ottoman Empire. Secret negotiations between the British and French had already placed Palestine into an "international" area to be administered by the British. In reality, the scheme promised to add Palestine, Trans-Jordan, and Iraq into the British Empire in everything but name. Allenby told a colleague before leaving England that he would ensure that "the 1,335 years of Mohammedan rule [in Palestine] would end in 1917."[15] Just weeks after his arrival in the Middle East, Allenby learned of the death of his only son in battle on the western front. He folded the telegram and placed it in his pocket without saying a word. He threw himself body and soul into capturing Jerusalem. Allenby moved his headquarters from the hotel room in Cairo that Murray had used to the front lines and became as visible as any British commander during the entire war.

The Central Powers did not remain passive. In May 1917, the Ottomans accepted the arrival of German General Erich von Falkenhayn, who created the Yildrim (lightning) Army Group. Falkenhayn placed sixty-five German officers (as opposed to just nine Ottoman officers) in staff positions. This German dominance led Mustafa Kemal to resign his position as commander of one of the Yildrim armies and return to Constantinople, complaining that Falkenhayn had turned Turkey into a "German colony."[16] Falkenhayn placed the Yildrim Army Group along a line from Gaza to Beersheba, where it faced a British force that had a 2 to 1 advantage in infantry and an 8 to 1 advantage in cavalry.

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Allenby boldly attacked Beersheba on the night of October 31, with a full moon illuminating the way. A daring cavalry charge by the Australian Light Horse allowed the British to capture the city and its critical water wells intact. The next day, British artillery prepared an attack on Gaza with 15,000 shells. Falkenhayn had little choice but to stage a fighting withdrawal, allowing British forces to enter Palestine and capture Jaffa, Jerusalem's chief port, on November 16.

Allenby planned to take Jerusalem itself via a rapid encirclement, both to spare the city damage and to fulfill his pledge to Lloyd George. The first British attempt failed on November 25, but it became clear that Ottoman morale was cracking. On December 8, Ottoman forces began their withdrawal from the holy city, allowing Allenby to enter it on December 11, two weeks ahead of schedule. Four centuries of Ottoman rule in Mecca, Baghdad, and Jerusalem were over.

Anticipating a German attack in France in 1918, the British sent many elements of Allenby's force back to the western front. Still, in the spring, Allenby resumed the offensive, taking Jericho in February and raiding Amman in March, causing Falkenhayn to be demoted to Lithuania. By the end of the summer, Arab and British forces were working in tandem, with the former harassing Ottoman lines of communication and latter bringing air and artillery assets to bear. At the Battle of Meggido in September the British annihilated the Turkish Eighth Army, opening the roads to Nazareth, Haifa, Acre, and Damascus. In the war's final weeks, the Ottomans lost Beirut, Aleppo, and Mosul as well.

The Palestine and Arabian campaigns thus marked significant military victories for Great Britain. Their many promises to many groups, however, soon created an untenable situation. The British reneged on the implied guarantees in the Hussein-McMahon letters and also reneged on a promise to the 5,000 volunteers of the Jewish Legion that they could settle in Palestine after the war. They also delayed implementing the Balfour Declaration. Instead,

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Britain stayed true to the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which gave the British control of Palestine, Trans-Jordan, and Mesopotamia while France took control of Lebanon and Syria. The result was a series of anti-Jewish Arab riots in 1920 and 1921 and a Gordian knot that the British could not possibly cut. The Middle East's tortured twentieth century had been born.

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