

The Ottoman Empire's campaign in the Sinai Peninsula, Palestine and Syria

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Marcus Fielding summarises the Ottoman Empire's First World War campaign in the Sinai, Palestine and Syria, which included raids on the Suez Canal, the defence of the Gaza-Beersheba line and key battles at Katia, Romani, Magdhaba, Jerusalem and Megiddo. He critically examines the relationships between key German and Ottoman leaders and concludes that, although defeated by the Allies, the Turkish soldiers ended the war with their reputation as fighting men intact.

Key words: First World War; Ottoman Empire; British Empire; Sinai; Palestine; Syria; Yildirim Army Group; Enver Pasha; Mustafa Kemal Pasha; Djemal Pasha; Cevat Pasha; Fevzi Pasha; Ismet Bey; Kress von Kressenstein; Erich von Falkenhayn; Liman von Sanders.

Within a month of the Ottoman Empire entering the war on the side of the Central Powers on 31 October 1914, fighting had broken out on three fronts: with the Russians in the Caucuses and Persia; and with the British and her allies in Mesopotamia and the Sinai Peninsula. Each of these distinct campaigns would continue for nearly four years – slowly bleeding the Empire dry of men and resources. The opening of an additional front on the Gallipoli Peninsula in April 1915 caused some additional pressure on the Empire's resources, but when the Allies withdrew in January 1916, the Ottomans were able to reinforce the other three fronts. Throughout the war, the Ottoman Empire balanced military demands against available resources.

The Sinai Peninsula Campaign

Egypt was still a nominal vassal state of the Ottoman Empire, but, since 1882, the British had exercised political control and Europeans ran the economy. On 5 November 1914, the British abolished the Khedivate, proclaimed a Sultanate of Egypt and made Egypt a 'protectorate'. In an effort to consolidate available forces, the small British military and Egyptian police force presence in the Sinai Peninsula was withdrawn.

In late November 1914, Djemal Pasha was appointed as the Governor of Syria with full powers in military and civilian affairs and also as commander of the 4th Army in Palestine (with six divisions organised into two corps). At the same time, German Colonel Freiherr Kress von Kressenstein joined the 4th



Army as an 'adviser' and quickly identified an opportunity for offensive action. Appreciating the importance of the Suez Canal to the British and the potential to encourage the Egyptian Muslim population to rise up in rebellion against the British, Djemal Pasha sought and gained permission from the Turkish leader, Enver Pasha, to capture or disable the Suez Canal.



Kress von Kressenstein was the guiding military brain and chief architect for this offensive 'raid' and, in late January 1915, a force comprising approximately 19,000 men (including nine batteries of field artillery and one battery of 5.9 inch howitzers), a number of German-made pontoon boats, and 10,000 camels, launched out of Beersheba across the desert.

They chose to move the main force along the more difficult central approach route in an effort to avoid detection, but the British were aware of their approach from aerial reconnaissance and spies, so their attack came as no surprise to the defenders.

The Ottoman force managed to cross the 160km of desert in good order and with no loss of life. Attacks on the Suez Canal were made at several points in the vicinity of Ismailia on 3 February 1915 and, using German-made pontoon boats, small groups of troops were lodged on the western bank for a few hours.

The Canal was temporarily cut and several tens of thousands of Arabs joined the Ottomans in the fight, but

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the action failed to ignite a general revolt. After several days of fighting, and facing supply issues, the Ottoman force disengaged and retreated back across the Sinai Peninsula. Approximately 1500 Ottoman troops were killed or taken prisoner.

The Ottomans left a covering force in the Sinai Peninsula which continued to harass the Allied defenders and, at one point, even placed a mine in the Canal, but the desert space essentially became a buffer zone with little activity for the next 15 months.

Two months after the raid against the Suez Canal, the Allies opened a new front against the Ottoman Empire on the Gallipoli Peninsula, only to begin withdrawing eight months later in late December 1915.

In February 1916, the Russians captured Erzurum on the Caucasus front and, not long after, the newly-organised Allied Egyptian Expeditionary Force began to push eastward to adopt a more 'forward defence' of the Canal. This presence included patrols to destroy wells on the central and southern routes across the Sinai Peninsula – so as to force the Ottomans to operate on the coastal corridors where the guns of Allied warships could be brought to bear.

With a view to discouraging the Allies, Kress von Kressenstein dispatched a raiding force of 3500 troops to maul a concentration of Allied troops in the vicinity of Katia, some 40km east of the Suez Canal, on 23 April 1916.

Within a week of the Katia raid, the trapped British garrison at Kut in Mesopotamia surrendered and 13,000 Allied troops were taken prisoner. Ottoman spirits were buoyant after victories at Gallipoli, Kut and Katia in the space of three months.

Seeking to at least disrupt the ongoing preparations for an Allied offensive in the Sinai Peninsula and to potentially capture Romani (a few kilometres north-west of Katia), Kress von Kressenstein led a sizeable force of approximately 15,000 across the desert again on 3 August 1916. This time, however, the Allies were much better prepared and beat off the attack – killing 1200 Ottomans and taking 4000 prisoners. This action was to prove to be the Ottomans last significant 'forward' movement of the war.

The Allies then commenced their offensive and advanced in strength across the Sinai Peninsula. On 20 December 1916, they captured El Arish. On 23 December 1916, they captured Magdhaba and took 1300 prisoners. On 8 January 1917, they captured Rafa and took another 1600 prisoners. The Allies had now fully re-occupied the Sinai Peninsula and had extended their roads, railways and water pipeline across the Sinai to sustain their forward-most forces.

The Palestinian Campaign

The Ottomans now occupied a well-sited defensive line between Gaza on the coast and Beersheba 35km inland in the foothills of the Judean Hills. Djemal Pasha now based himself in Damascus leaving Kress von Kressenstein in charge of the Ottoman defensive line with approximately 18,000 troops.

In late February 1917 on the Mesopotamian Front, the

British re-captured Kut and finally captured Baghdad on 11 March 1917.

The Allies launched their first attack on Gaza on 26 March 1917, but the Ottoman defence was resolute and the British were defeated, largely due to their own errors. In the Second Battle of Gaza on 17 April 1917, the British were defeated again and the credit for this victory can largely be attributed to Kress von Kressenstein.

Confident about defending the Gaza-Beersheba line, the Ottomans were more concerned about the loss of Baghdad. To recapture Baghdad, they began to raise a new 7th Army at Aleppo under the command of Fevzi Pasha.



Kress von Kressenstein, however, convinced Enver Pasha that the Palestine Front was more strategically important and that the threat of further Allied advances – including the growing Arab Revolt in the Hejaz – were greater than on the Mesopotamian Front. And so, in June 1917, Enver Pasha directed that a Yildirim (meaning 'Lightning') Army Group be formed to defend Palestine. On 7 August 1917, Mustafa Kemal Pasha, the 'hero of Gallipoli', took over command of the 7th Army from Fevzi Pasha.

On 7 September 1917, after long discussions with the Ottoman and German upper echelons, German General Erich von Falkenhayn – the former Prussian minister of war; chief-of-staff of the German field armies; and commander of the German 9th Army – was sent to take command of the Yildirim Army Group with the rank of a mushir (field marshal) in the Ottoman Army. The Yildirim Army Group became the Ottoman's main effort and was reinforced with Ottoman units transferred from other fronts.



In late September, the 4th Army headquarters was relocated to Damascus where Djemal Pasha re-assumed command and was assigned responsibility for securing Syria and western Arabia.

In early October 1917, von Falkenhayn activated a new 8th Army to be commanded by Kress von Kressenstein. Comprising seven infantry divisions and

one cavalry division, the 8th Army was assigned responsibility for the western or coastal defence zone, including Gaza. Defensive works were extended inland as far as Tel-el-Sheria, two-thirds of the way between Gaza and Beersheba, where a substantial garrison was also developed. And a squadron of newly arrived German Halberstadt fighter aircraft, which outclassed Allied aircraft, gave the Ottomans local air mastery.

Mustafa Kemal Pasha was unhappy about the priorities between fronts and the tactical approach being adopted, and he did not get along with von Falkenhayn. He was also frustrated by a perceived lack of Ottoman influence in the decision-making processes. Djemal Pasha, his other Army commander, also had issues with von Falkenhayn. After several weeks of disagreements, Mustafa Kemal chose to resign his appointment and Fevzi Pasha was re-appointed as the commander of the 7th Army on 9 October 1917. But Fevzi Pasha was based in Aleppo and was unable to move forward to the front until 23 October 1917. Comprising four infantry divisions, as well as an element of the brigade-sized German Asia Corps, and arranged into two corps, the 7th Army was assigned responsibility for the eastern defence zone including Beersheba – but some assigned units were still in transit to the front.

By late October, the Ottomans had significantly re-inforced and reorganised the Gaza-Beersheba defensive line and had progressively developed and extended the defensive works over several months. Not only increasing the width and depth of their front lines, they developed mutually-supporting strong redoubts on ideal defensive ground. Most of them overlooked an almost flat plain, devoid of cover. By the second half of October 1917, the Ottomans could be reasonably confident that the anticipated Allied attack could be repulsed once again. If there were an attack against Beersheba, the Ottomans were sure that it would only be a demonstration or ruse.

Third Battle of Gaza

The events of the Third Battle of Gaza are well documented (*e.g.* Gullett 1923; Coates 2006: 96 – 107; Bou 2010; Dawson 2017) and, despite shortages in ammunition and food, the Ottoman defence was dogged. There is evidence that the Allied deception plan as to the time and place of the main attack (*i.e.* Gaza or Beersheba) was very effective and prevented the timely use of reserves and counter-attack forces. The Australian official history – produced immediately after the war – recorded that the Germans and Ottomans simply failed to appreciate that a major attack through Beersheba was feasible or likely to succeed. Indeed, the Allies overestimated the capacity of the wells at Beersheba and therefore the size of the force that could be supported on that flank (Gullett 1923: 384). The official history also identified that “this miscalculation was further endangered by steps taken to re-organise the Turkish forces. The Seventh and Eight Armies, which were then brought into being, were not fully completed, and the new army leaders and their staffs lacked any such grasp of their commands as was to be desired in the crisis then pending” (Gullett 1923: 373).

Fevzi Pasha had only a few days on the ground to familiarise himself with the situation and defensive arrangements on the Gaza-Beersheba line. It is not known whether he was briefed by or even met von Falkenhayn. Similarly, it is not recorded whether Fevzi Pasha had the opportunity to confer with his flanking fellow Army commander, Kress von Kressenstein. The relationship between the three men, their mutual understanding of arrangements, and the ability for them to communicate with each other, would impact the robustness of the defensive plan.

Kress von Kressenstein, in an article written immediately after the war, stated that there was considerable friction between von Falkenhayn and Djemal Pasha (von Kressenstein 1922: 510). Wavell, in his later account of the campaign, stated that “Further, the Germans, for all their efficiency, never seem to have appreciated the idiosyncrasies of the fighting methods of their allies. They frequently ordered counter-attacks or movements requiring a promptness of action and a precision of manoeuvre unknown to the Turks, with consequent failure and mutual recrimination. All things considered, the Germans put almost as much grit as oil into the military machine” (Wavell 1928: 346). Von Falkenhayn’s appointment and Mustafa Kemal’s sudden resignation clearly triggered a period when the command and control arrangements were less than stable and the defence was more vulnerable as a result.

Additionally, working to Fevzi Pasha, the commander of III Corps, Ismet Bey, defending Beersheba, was also newly arrived at the front. The Beersheba garrison was significantly reinforced by the Ottomans as late as 27 and 28 October 1917.

Kress von Kressenstein also was critical of orders issued by von Falkenhayn on 28 October 1917 that re-assigned responsibility for the defence from Tel-el-Sheria eastward to Fevzi Pasha – but then, in a supplementary order, stated that these arrangements were not to apply if an Allied attack occurred before the command architecture was ‘in place’. Kress von Kressenstein later wrote that this action was not only unfair to Fevzi Pasha, but that he felt it was “injudicious” – or showing very poor judgement.

On 31 October when the Allies’ XX Corps attacked, they significantly outnumbered the Ottoman forces. The Ottomans defended against attacks from multiple directions with a dogged resistance and Ismet Bey decided to commit his last battalion in reserve to reinforce the significant pressure on his south-western sector. At the same time, he withdrew two companies of the Arab 81st Regiment (defending the area north of the Wadi-es-Saba) back into Beersheba. The telegraph line to Beersheba was cut around midday leaving Ismet Bey isolated.

The one battalion and a machine-gun company defending Tel-el-Saba (4km east of Beersheba) was forced to abandon the position at 1500 hours and began to withdraw back to Beersheba. The New Zealand Mounted Infantry maintained their pressure and captured 132 prisoners as they secured Tel-el-Saba. Ismet Bey, at 1600 hours, believing that the Beersheba garrison

position was no longer tenable and fearing encirclement, ordered a withdrawal from Beersheba northwards to prepared depth positions. At the same time, the 27th Division's engineers were ordered to destroy the Beersheba water supply.

The Australian 4th Light Horse Brigade's charge began at 1630 hours. A German officer taken prisoner at Beersheba told the Australians that the Turkish commander and his staff had fled about 10 minutes before the Australians entered the town. It is interesting that, subsequent to the event, von Kressenstein was highly critical of Ismet Bey, who in turn laid the blame on von Kressenstein for the failure to commit reserves in a timely manner.



Suffice that chance and luck were with the Allies on 31 October 1917 and, after capturing Beersheba, they were able to exploit this small tactical success and break into the main Gaza-Beersheba defensive line. This effort took a week and involved an infantry corps attack on Gaza itself, but eventually the Ottomans deemed the Gaza position untenable and retreated in good order to new defensive positions further north. But the 7th and 8th Armies had been split – the 8th conducting a delaying defence northwards along the coastal plains zone and the 7th Army along the long north-south axis of the Judean Hills – and the ability to co-ordinate a defensive line across the width of Palestine was undermined.

Mughar, Jerusalem and Beyond

At the Battle of Mughar Ridge on 13 November 1917, the 8th Army lost Jaffa and retired across the Auja River, while the 7th Army withdrew into the Judean Hills to defend Jerusalem. By the end of November, the Ottomans had withdrawn approximately 80km, losing 10,000 prisoners and 100 guns, and suffering heavy casualties.

Von Falkenhayn was unable to prevent the Allies from capturing Jerusalem on 9 December 1917, but he is credited with avoiding a destructive defensive battle for the ancient walled city.

By the end of 1917, the Yildirim Army Group was considerably weakened from losses, but they were still a competent fighting force. Their ability to form combined arms groups and conduct delaying defence tactics were effective, but the attritional cost was substantial. The Ottoman soldiers were tough, obdurate and professional fighters. Every infantry division which had fought at Beersheba was intact and still fighting, although some were considerably reduced in strength. To make up for the losses, reinforcements were transferred from the Caucasus to Palestine in late 1917.

German air superiority ended with the arrival of the S.E.5a and Bristol fighters – one of which destroyed three German Albatross scouts on 12 December 1917. From

early 1918, these British planes increasingly dominated the skies above Palestine.

The defeat at Beersheba and the subsequent losses in troops and territory, as well as criticism about the paucity of Ottoman participation in planning processes, saw the Ottoman high command becoming increasingly dissatisfied with von Falkenhayn. The influence of detractors like Mustafa Kemal and Djemal Pasha also would have had influence on deliberations in Constantinople. And so, on 19 February 1918, Enver Pasha replaced him with Marshal Otto Liman von Sanders – the ablest commander-advisor the Germans had sent the Turks.



Liman von Sanders took command of the Yildirim Army Group from von Falkenhayn on 1 March 1918. He changed von Falkenhayn's 'active, flexible defence' to a more unyielding defence. The geography now allowed him to better integrate a more linear defensive line with the 8th, 7th and 4th Armies deployed west to east in a line just north of Jaffa, Jerusalem and Jericho. Allied attacks eastward across the Jordan River towards Amman at the end of March 1918 were successfully repelled.

At around this time, Cevat Pasha, an experienced Ottoman officer and Gallipoli veteran, replaced Kress von Kressenstein as the commander of the 8th Army, although the reasons for this change are unclear. In the middle of 1918, with the Ottoman-German alliance breaking down, Kress von Kressenstein was sent with a small German force to Georgia, which was protected by Germany after its independence. He helped to frustrate the Red Army's invasion of the Georgian region of Abkhazia.



Allied losses from the German Spring Offensive on the Western Front saw Allenby lose 60,000 trained and experienced troops as reinforcements to France, thereby pausing Allied offensive action in the Middle East. The Allies later received lesser-trained troops, which then had to be trained and integrated into the Egyptian Expeditionary Force.

In May 1918, during the lull in fighting, Liman von Sanders took the opportunity to reorganise the Yildirim Army Group, but his depleted and under-resourced forces were unable to do anything more than occupy defensive positions and wait for the anticipated Allied attack.

When Mehmed VI became the new Sultan of the Ottoman Empire in July 1918, he called Mustafa Kemal Pasha to Constantinople and, in August 1918, assigned him to command the 7th Army for a second time. Mustafa Kemal arrived in Aleppo on 26 August 1918 and then continued south to his Army headquarters in Nablus.

The Syrian Campaign

The Allies launched their offensive on 19 September 1918 on the western coastal plain sector of the line in what became known as the Battle of Megiddo. The Allies possessed a significant numerical and logistical advantage, Allied air power was potent and decisive, and the Allied deception operations regarding the main thrust of the offensive again had worked well. The 8th Army's (not very deep) defence quickly came apart. Once holes were opened in the front-line defences, Allied cavalry raced through to penetrate deeply and wreak havoc in the rear areas (much like the Germans' blitzkrieg tactics in the Second World War).

In order to prevent the Allies from conducting an enveloping movement eastwards towards the Jordan River, Liman von Sanders was forced to withdraw the 7th Army north. Allied aerial bombardment during the 7th Army's retreat inflicted heavy casualties. Von Sanders' headquarters in Nazareth was attacked by a specially designated force with a view to capturing him and they were only just unsuccessful.

Within days, the Allies had blocked the retreat of the 7th and 8th Armies and 25,000 prisoners were taken. Ottoman resistance west of the Jordan River had been broken. The 4th Army continued to harry the Allies from the east but, as the battlefront moved north, that force disintegrated. Damascus fell on 2 October 1918 and Aleppo – the third largest city of the Ottoman Empire – in northern Syria, on 25 October 1918.

The Ottoman Government was quite prepared to sacrifice these non-Turkish provinces without surrendering. Indeed, while these battles were raging, the Ottoman Empire sent an expeditionary force into Russia to enlarge the ethnic Turkish elements of the Empire. It was only after the surrender of Bulgaria, which put the Empire in a vulnerable position for invasion, that the Ottoman Government was compelled to sign an armistice at Mudros on 30 October 1918, and surrendered outright two days later.

Conclusion

The geo-strategic consequences of this campaign are hard to overestimate. The British conquest of Palestine led directly to the British mandate over Palestine, the Trans-Jordan and Iraq. British policy encouraged thousands of Jews to migrate to Palestine and by the late 1930s the Jews had organised into several groups that were contesting British authority as well as Arab interests. In 1947, the British government requested the United Nations to deal with the matter and, as a consequence, the state of Israel was formed in 1948. The French secured mandates over Lebanon and Syria which witnessed further Allied operations against the Vichy French during World War II. Lastly, the Ottoman Empire

dissolved and the secular state of Turkey was created. Many of the Turkish personalities involved in the defence of Palestine took up senior government appointments in the subsequent decades.

But at the tactical level and as individuals, the Turks ended the war with their reputations as fighting men intact. Henry Gullett captured the likeness of the Turkish soldier well. He wrote: "Such conditions would have been fatal to the spirit and fighting capacity of any European troops engaged in a similar campaign. But the Turk as a fighter is unlike any other soldier in the world. Even when he is wretchedly fed and miserably equipped ... he will continue month after month and year after year a dangerous foe to troops of a higher civilisation fighting under the happiest conditions. No set of circumstances, however depressing, appears able to diminish his dogged resistance, while if the opportunity is propitious he can always be stirred to the offensive" (Gullett 1923: 260-261).

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