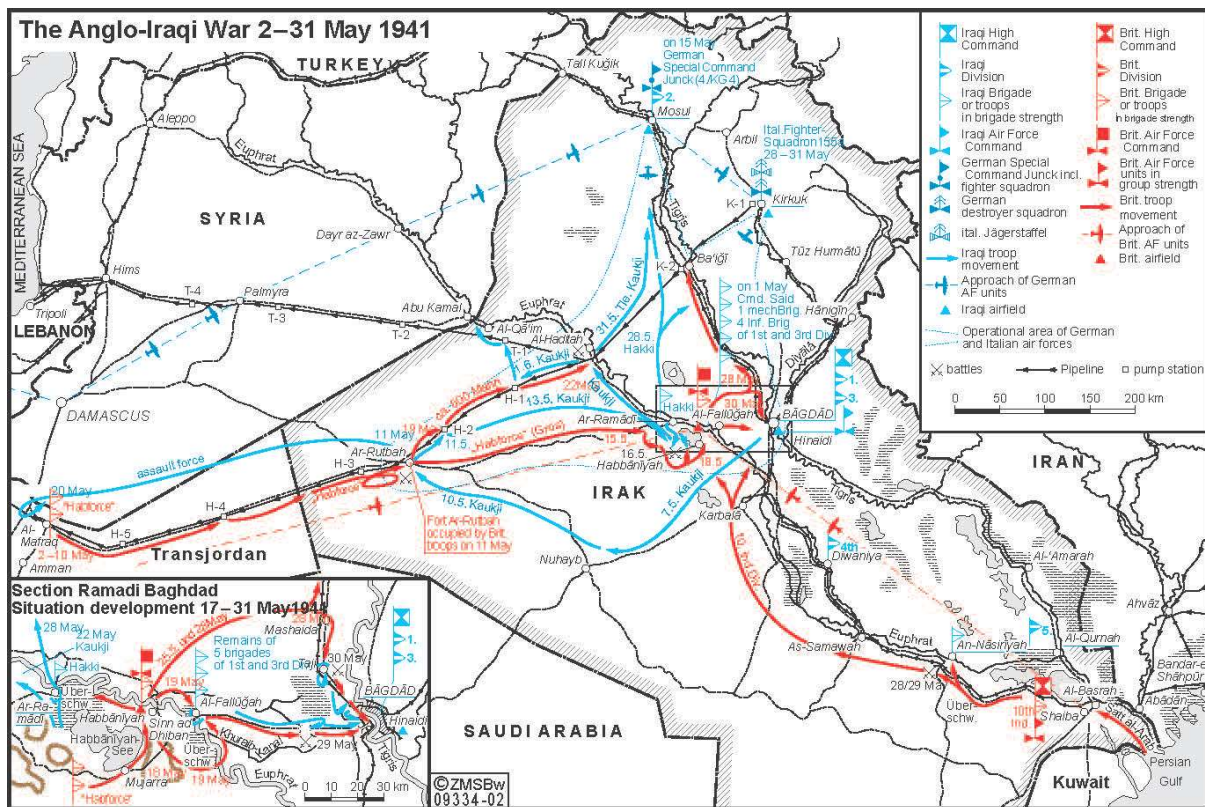


German troops in Iraq in 1941. An episode between Euphrates and Tigris



The "Middle East" as an ally against Great Britain

It is a little-known fact that German soldiers were employed in operations in Iraq in 1941. It was a military and probably also a political adventure in the Anglo-Iraqi war. In its Directive No. 30 of 23 May 1941, the German dictator Adolf Hitler emphasised the importance of this theatre of war: "The Arab freedom movement is our natural ally in the Middle East against England. In this context, the uprising of Iraq is of particular significance. It strengthens anti-English in the Middle East beyond the Iraqi borders, disrupts English lines of communication and contains English troops as well as English shipboard space at the expense of other theatres of war."

In February 1941, Lieutenant General Erwin Rommel was dispatched to Libya. With his armoured force, he was to stop the British advance in North Africa. Later on, he would indeed conduct a successful counterattack up to the gates of Alexandria. Rommel's successes were a ray of hope for Arab nationalism. Initially, Iraq's role at the time was not quite clear. Iraq had been officially independent since 1932. It was expected that Iraq as a member of the League of Nations, which the German Reich had resigned from in 1933, and long-time ally of Great Britain would eventually join the ranks of Germany's wartime enemies. This, at least, was the official position of King Faisal II and the Iraqi government.

The coup d'état in Iraq in 1941

In April 1941, suddenly everything changed. A coup d'état by Islamist nationalist officers resulted in a change of government. The new government was led by Rashid Ali al-Gaylani, who was known for his stance in favour of a rapprochement with Italy. Great Britain responded swiftly. British troops used the port of Basra to land troops. Officially, this served to launch the move to Egypt against Rommel. The actual objective was to intimidate or depose the government of the putschists. However, the Iraqis were all the more determined. They turned to Italy and the Great German Reich with a specific wish, namely for support against the British troops in the country. When Great Britain realised this danger, the forces of Basra proceeded with a pre-emptive air attack on Baghdad. As a result, the Iraqi Air Force with its approximately 60 aircraft was almost completely destroyed. Only six fighter aircraft remained.

The putschist government fighting against British troops had a serious legitimization problem both domestically and internationally since the session of the Iraqi Parliament had ended before the coup and Parliament had not yet reconvened. In addition, the British ambassador had not submitted his letter of accreditation, which could also be regarded as a sign of international non-recognition of the coup government in Iraq. The Germans did not really want to actively intervene. In their opinion, this would be an unnecessary interference with the interests of Italy and Vichy France. Furthermore, at the time, the secret preparations for their attack on the Soviet Union had already entered a critical phase. But the British attack of 1 April 1941 had put an end to this policy of regional restraint. A mission of the Foreign Office to Iraq headed by Ambassador Fritz Grobba became a clear sign of recognition and support.

German arms deliveries and military intervention

Hitler gave the go-ahead for the requested military assistance. The offer was unusually generous, after all, at the time Germany's attack on the Soviet Union was imminent. 9 Messerschmidt Bf 110 fighter aircraft (4th/Destroyer Wing 76) and 12 Heinkel He 111 bombers (4th/Combat Wing 4) were weapon systems intended to provide Iraq once again with an air force capability. In order to deliver this "aid package", an "Aviation Commander Iraq" (*Fliegerführer Irak*), and from early May 1941 a "Special staff F" (*Sonderstab F*) were planned. The latter was also called "German Special Command Junck" (*Deutsches Sonderkommando Junck*), after its leader, Colonel Werner Junck. A liaison staff was located in Aleppo, Syria, and the supply unit was stationed on the Greek island of Rhodes.

The "what?" was clarified relatively quickly, but the "how?" of the support caused the planners in Berlin some problems. How was the transfer to succeed with Turkey or Persia being neutral states? Therefore, attention was again focused on the question of "what?". Instead of sending weapons from Germany, weapon systems that had already been stored were to be used. These systems could be "reinforced" from Germany. After the defeat of 1940, the former French stocks in Syria were under Italian administration. Officially, however, Syria was still under the command of collaborating Vichy France.

Meanwhile, Italy and Vichy France agreed to the German plans. Neutral Turkey opened the railway line for transports to Syria. In the subsequent period, two rail

transports reached their destination in Iraq, Mosul, via Aleppo. The trains also contained 15,500 rifles, 200 machine guns and 354 submachine guns, four 75 mm guns, eight 155 mm guns, 5 million rounds of ammunition and about 7000 grenades, 30,000 hand grenades, 32 trucks, technical means of communication and other things. However, only a small part was distributed beyond Mosul.

Operation and rapid end near Baghdad

The logistic base and maintenance facilities remained in Syria also during the operation in Iraq. Initially, the essential airport in Iraq was Mosul in northern Iraq, later there were also Kirkuk and Baghdad. A first overflight of Baghdad by the assessment team was to be a symbol to present to the Iraqi population the regained strength. During the landing approach of the He III on 12 May 1941, shots were fired, presumably "friendly fire". As required, the Germans had fired an identification signal four times before landing, which had obviously been misunderstood. The pilot and technical officer, Lieutenant Colonel Siegfried Knemeyer, was still able to land. However, the son of the former Reich War Minister, Major Axel von Blomberg, was fatally injured by a shot in his neck.

Subsequently, the Germans tried to gain air supremacy in Iraq with their approximately 24 destroyer and combat aircraft and bombed the airport of al-Habbaniyya, some 90 km from Baghdad, which had been used by the British since 1936. These attacks and further operations against ground forces as well as reconnaissance flights came at a price. And there was also a British air attack on Mosul airfield. At the end of May 1941, the Germans had only three combat aircraft in operation. There were no German casualties in the battles with the British, though. However, they had overestimated the will for resistance of the rather Anglophobe population.

On 30 May 1941, the British captured suburbs of Baghdad. Two German Heinkel bombers were still on site; they were left behind during the withdrawal. The bulk of the special group in Iraq redeployed via Aleppo and Rhodes using transport aircraft. The last Germans redeployed from Baghdad to Mosul by car and reached Aleppo from there in early June. Shortly afterwards, "Special staff F" was officially disbanded in Athens. In June 1941, the Anglo-Iraqi war had ended, and a new pro-English government had been established. On 16 January 1943, Iraq finally declared war on the Great German Reich. A collateral damage for German intentions in Central Asia and India had become apparent much earlier. From March to June 1941, the Afghan Minister of National Economy, Abdul Majid Khan, visited Berlin for health reasons to be treated by the well-known physician, Professor Ferdinand Sauerbruch, and he also held political talks with the Foreign Office. As the situation in Iraq worsened, he became less and less inclined to support German interests against the British. The German adventure in Iraq had completely failed in 1941.

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