
REPORT

Andrew Lambert
Air Commodore, Royal Air Force (Retired)

2009-07-24

THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN AND THE PROJECTION OF AIR POWER

INTRODUCTION

1. Though now much forgotten, the Mediterranean has been a cauldron of Air Power experimentation, notching up a number of “firsts” in air warfare. It was the location for the first Strategic Bombing campaign (Capronis in 1915 v Austria). It provided the site where Air Power’s domination of ground forces was demonstrated for the first time (Wadi el Fara). It was the place where, again for the first time, and under wartime conditions, a battle fleet was destroyed from the air (Taranto). And it was the place where an entire country was saved from almost certain destruction, by the rapid resupply of war materiel by air (Yom Kippur)¹.
2. The good weather in the region has been an important factor in Air Power’s successes, helping Air Power to demonstrate its ability to yield both tactical and strategic results. Not only at Wadi el Fara, but during the North African Campaign in 1942/3, and at the Mitla Pass (1967), Air Power achieved psychological and physical effects that were truly decisive.
3. This paper, considering the history and importance of Air Power in the Eastern Mediterranean, will concentrate largely on Britain and the RAF’s operations in the region. This is not to minimise such events as the ’67 Arab Israeli War where Air Power destroyed the Egyptian Air Force on the first day, the Yom Kippur War mentioned above, or even the effectiveness of Operations PROVIDE COMFORT and NORTHERN WATCH, both mounted from Turkey, but simply to focus attention on Cyprus and its role in the Eastern Mediterranean. Even this gives the author a broad canvas to show how much the RAF has been intimately involved in the region; for example, the author’s own squadron was involved in offensive operations in Southern Italy, at Lecce in 1943, and again, exactly 50 years later when he was the Squadron Commander, based at Gioia del Colle, for operations over Bosnia! And even now Akrotiri provides a base for air combat training and for resupply to the Middle East.

¹ In this, the 1973 Yom Kippur War, although only 26% of US aid was sent by air, none of the 74% sent by sea arrived before the fighting stopped. And without that flow of more than 27,000 tons of tanks artillery and ammunition, not to mention the 56 ready-to-fight combat aircraft, Israel could well have succumbed.

RELEVANCE OF AIR POWER

4. Since 1991 the surgical accuracy of modern air weapons has become so impressive that its fact is recognized by all who might challenge the West's superiority². This effect has imposed 2 changes on the way in which nations (and sub-state actors) now regulate their affairs:

- a. For the West's competitors, wars of high technology are no longer seen as lucrative, as they will lose and lose quickly - even if, like Saddam Hussein, they have spent a fortune on the way. Competitors who wish to challenge the West are forced, therefore, to find their own asymmetric methods. Principal amongst these is the use of civilians, either as human shields (such as in built-up areas), or as targets directly, as we now see in terrorist activities almost daily.
- b. If high-technology (peer-group) confrontations are likely to occur less often, then other roles of Air Power become more salient, in particular reconnaissance, humanitarian relief and direct support for the army in the field. In this latter category, just as in Iraq in the inter-war period and in Afghanistan today, Air Power now substitutes for a shortage of soldiers on the ground.

EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

5. The Eastern Mediterranean and its proximate land mass has been a cross-road for mass migrations for centuries. Since the arrival of the Sea Peoples in the 13th Century BC the Eastern Mediterranean has been the location for almost perpetual inter-ethnic strife and now, with this strife being exacerbated by inter-faith conflict, it is difficult to envisage a harmonious future for the region.

6. Conscious that whatever may be written could be taken as another example of imperial nostalgia, and a continuing desire to control world events, it is nevertheless important to see British interests in the region in context. Although the Barbary pirates gave Britain an early rationale for a presence in the Mediterranean, it was the growing power of France that brought Great Britain into the region.

BRITISH INTEREST IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

7. Certainly, by the time of Bonaparte, British interests in the Eastern Mediterranean were manifested in a desire to prevent Napoleon from establishing French control. It was thought the French might attack the Ottoman Empire either in Egypt or even by direct assault on Constantinople itself, and Nelson was ordered to contain the French Fleet and, if possible, to destroy it. Maintaining a blockade off Toulon, on 20th May 1798 Nelson's fleet was caught in a storm, and whilst the British were undertaking repairs off Sardinia, Bonaparte departed Toulon unobserved. Not sure of his intended destination, Nelson sailed post-haste to Naples in the hope of gaining intelligence from the British ambassador, Sir William Hamilton. The indications were that Bonaparte was in Malta so Nelson sailed there without delay. Arriving off Malta on 22nd Jun, Nelson was informed that Napoleon had just left towards the East. Turning towards Egypt, the fleet noticed sails to the East North-East, but Nelson assumed them to be stragglers and accelerated South-Eastwards. Arriving off Alexandria one day before Napoleon, Nelson assumed he had mistaken Napoleon's destination and began immediately to sail for Constantinople. After searching for

² But this asymmetry will only prevail for as long as the West (and the USA in Particular) maintains its investment and continues to sustain a large margin of military superiority.

some while, just off Cape Matapan, he was told that the Turkish governor had been informed of the French invasion of Egypt. Again Nelson set sail for Alexandria. Making fast progress in a favourable wind, early in the afternoon of 1st August he was off the city.

8. In the subsequent battle at Aboukir Bay, Britain lost 218 killed and 677 wounded. France lost 5000 and her entire fleet. Napoleon and his army were stranded. Britain was the Master of Mediterranean, a mastery she never entirely lost. - And Nelson, wounded in the battle, returned to Naples to the arms of Emma... (But that's another story!).

9. Contemporaneously with Aboukir Bay, the British East India Company had, since the Battle of Plassey in 1756, progressively been creating the foundations of a commercial empire on the Indian sub-continent. As this empire grew so too did the need to preserve the Lines of Communication (LOC) both around the Cape of Good Hope, and also by land and sea, across the Eastern Mediterranean.

SUEZ AND OIL

10. During the 18/19th Century, "the Sick Man of Europe", the disintegrating Ottoman Empire, was unwittingly creating a strategic vacuum into which expansionist Russia, from Catherine the Great³ onwards, attempted to develop. Russian areas of interest were both in the Eastern Mediterranean, and South-Eastwards towards British India, where according to the phrase of the day, Russian soldiers would "wash their boots in warm water". The opening of the Suez Canal in Nov 1869, coupled with a progressive, yet accelerating demand for oil, set the strategic priorities for Britain in the Eastern Mediterranean: first was the need to secure the LOCs to the Empire, and 2nd to guarantee British access to the oil fields of the Middle East.

11. Oil was discovered in Baku in 1846, in Iran in 1908, in Iraq in 1927, in Saudi Arabia in 1932 and Kuwait in 1956. Many of the new oil discoveries occurred in areas either owned by Britain, or within the British mandated territories in the Middle East. By 1919, Britain controlled 50 percent of the world's proven oil reserves.

FLIGHT – EARLY MILITARY USE

12. By 1900 Britannia certainly ruled the waves, with a large fleet and suitable bases right across the Mediterranean, but the first powered flight in 1903 was inevitably going to upset the comfortable status quo and change the future pattern of warfare. Though static airships had previously been successfully employed (*inter alia*) for spotting and reconnaissance at the Battle of Fleurus⁴, during the Siege of Paris⁵ in

³ The naval **Battle of Chesme** took place on 5-7 July 1770 near and in Çeşme (Chesme) Bay, in the area between Asia Minor and the island of Chios the site of a number of past naval battles between Turkey and Venice. It was a precursor to the later Greek War of Independence (1821-29), and the first of a number of disastrous fleet battles for Turkey against Russia.

⁴ During the French Revolution one of the first acts of the Committee of Public Safety was to appoint an advisory commission that recommended using observation balloons to help France's armies. In the **Battle of Fleurus** (June 26, 1794) French forces under Jourdan defeated a large Austrian army under Saxe-Cobourg in one of the most decisive battles of the period. French use of the reconnaissance balloon *l'Entreprenant* marked the first military use of an aircraft and it is acknowledged by both sides that the balloon had a decisive influence on the outcome of the battle.

⁵ Air medical transport is thought to have first occurred in 1870 during the **Siege of Paris** when 160 wounded French soldiers were transported by hot-air balloon to France. Balloon mail was also used to overcome the communications blockade, with a rate of 20 cents per letter. Letters were photographically reduced by René Dagron to save weight. A total of 66 balloon flights were made, including one that accidentally set a world distance record by ending up in Norway.

1870, throughout the Boer War⁶, and had even been used by Napoleon⁷, it was the advent of powered aircraft, of machines that could propel themselves wherever they wished over the battlefield, that would prove decisive; with the Italians being the first to employ powered aircraft in war.

13. On 29 September 1911 Italy declared war on the Ottoman Empire and after preliminary naval bombardments, with fire being directed from static balloons, Italian naval forces occupied Tobruk (4 October) and Tripoli (5 October). On October 23, 1911, an Italian pilot flew over Turkish lines on a reconnaissance mission, and on November 1, the first ever aerial bomb was dropped when Lieutenant Guilio Gavotti threw four small grenades out of his plane to terrorize Turkish troops below.

14. The first military use of an aircraft had occurred just 8 years after the first powered flight. Thereafter, the Italians used aircraft successfully for

- a. Reconnaissance
- b. Artillery Spotting
- c. Transport of supplies & personnel
- d. Bombing enemy troops, supplies and facilities

15. With victory won, Colonel Douhet was tasked with writing a report on the campaign. His imagination had been caught in 1905 by the first Italian dirigible and in 1908 by Italy's first powered aircraft. In 1910 he had written "the skies are about to become a battlefield as important as the land or sea". By 1914 Douhet had become an Air Power zealot; branded a "radical", his ideas so enraged his superiors that he was exiled to the infantry. This did not stop him writing in Dec 1914 that "to gain command of the air is to be able to attack with impunity any part of the enemy's body". For this he wanted 500 bombers, and he suggested dropping 100 tons of High Explosive (HE) per day on Constantinople to coerce the Porte into opening the Dardanelles to Allied shipping.

WORLD WAR I

16. The outbreak of WWI found the British in control of Egypt, and an airbase was hastily constructed at Ismailia. On 27 Nov 1914 a Maurice Farman biplane conducted the first aerial reconnaissance of the Suez Zone against an expected Ottoman attack through Palestine. By mid January 1915 a mixed force of Maurice Farmans and seaplanes had been deployed to Egypt, formed No 30 Sqn, and were used in the defeat of the Turkish advance later that year.

17. By 1917 the decision was taken to evict the Turks from Palestine and Allenby's offensive began on 27 Oct that year. By 11 Dec 17 Allenby had taken Jerusalem after hard fighting. Faced by 3 Turkish armies, VIII, VII and IV, Allenby attacked in Sep 1918. And if the effectiveness of Air Power in Europe had been impressive, now it was to demonstrate a new potency.

⁶ Observation balloons were used by the British during the war to observe the movements of Boer troops in the difficult, rugged South African terrain. They were much feared by the Boers who were otherwise very difficult to detect.

⁷ Coutelle persuaded Napoleon to allow the Aérosters to accompany the troops to Egypt in 1797. However, the skills of the Aérosters were not efficiently used, and at the Battle of Aboukir in 1798, the British destroyed the equipment. Upon returning to France in 1799, Napoleon disbanded the Aérosters and the balloon school. With that, the dream of a French airborne invasion of Great Britain died, and the use of balloons by the French military was suspended for 40 years.

18. Air was initially targeted against telephone exchanges, and successfully cut communication links between all Turkish HQ – so much so that IV Army, East of the Jordan, was blissfully unaware of the start of the assault – and remained in camp. The other 2 armies now bore the brunt of the attack:

- a. VIII Army. Rapid British cavalry and armoured vehicles outflanked VIII's positions and by noon VIII Army began a strategic retreat East down Wadi Zeimer. Fighters and bombers pounced on them; the size of the force retreating between Et Tire and Tul Keram was estimated at approximately 6000 troops and 500 vehicles. The greatest slaughter, however, took place between Tul Keram and Anebta, where the Bristol Fighters, DH9s, and SE5s bombed and strafed the retreating columns, trapped in a defile created by the small Wadi Zeimer. The German commander General Liman von Sanders subsequently wrote:

“The low-flying British bombing formations, relieved every half-hour, littered the road with dead troops, horses, and shattered vehicles. Officers repeatedly attempted to rally the troops, but in vain as they were concerned only with their own safety.”

- b. VII Army On the next day VIII Army retreated northwards to El Affule, whilst VII Army moved towards Wadi el Fara, to move eastwards to the Jordan, presumably to link up with IV Army. Both VII and VIII were heavily attacked by aircraft, engendering panic amongst the troops and stampedes amongst the vast number of horse-drawn transport. By the end of the day VIII had lost all semblance of order and was in mass flight, with many looking for an opportunity to find safety in surrender.
- c. Wadi el Fara On the 3rd day, 21 Sep, early morning recce revealed VII still strung out along the old Roman road North then East through Wadi el Fara. At least 800 horse-drawn vehicles, troops in marching order and MT was streaming eastwards to the Jordan. All day long air raids were maintained along this winding road. No. 1 Squadron made six heavy raids during the day, dropped three tons of bombs, and fired nearly 24,000 machine-gun rounds into the struggling parties. Other squadrons attacked this same road with another three tons of bombs and 20,000 machine-gun rounds. Earlier the Turks, bolstered by German troops had fought well and had put up stiff resistance. The panic and the slaughter beggared all description. Now, their resolve gave out and they ran. TE Lawrence wrote:

"It was the RAF which converted the retreat into a rout, which had abolished their telephone and telegraph connections, had blocked their lorry columns and scattered their infantry units".

19. By 25 Sep Amman had been taken, and Damascus then fell on 30 Sep. This one attack, occurring in a theatre far away from the main scene of battle, may seem isolated and unique, but it reflects a growing fear of the potency of the aircraft that had already proved its efficacy over the fields of France, where the term “strafen” (to punish) became associated with an aircraft machine gun attack, where the Zeppelin had caused an outcry amongst the civilian populations of London, and where the strategic bombers of the (Allied) Independent Force were building up for a sustained attack on German cities in 1919 using what we would now call Weapons of Mass Destruction, namely a combination of HE and gas. Air Power had indeed changed the face of warfare.

INTER-WAR YEARS

20. The end of WWI left the UK with vast mandated areas in the Middle East, particularly in Trans Jordan and Mesopotamia. Because of a shortage of trained soldiers, in 1921 the RAF was given the Imperial Policing role in Mesopotamia and base construction across the region began. Apart from those constructed in Iraq, Palestine and Egypt, new permanent air bases were to be constructed on Gibraltar, Malta and Cyprus:

- a. The idea of an airfield in Gibraltar dates back to the 1920s when the then Governor of Gibraltar and his counterpart in Algeciras formulated a plan to construct a landing strip. The plan however, was rejected by both the Spanish and British governments. Permission was however granted to operate an air passenger service from Gibraltar to Tangier in 1931. The service operated from the racecourse, but was terminated after only three months due to maintenance difficulties. The first two RAF camps were constructed in Gibraltar at the beginning of the Second World War, the first was North Front Camp which was on the racecourse; the second was New Camp which was built on reclaimed land next to Montague Bastion.
- b. On Malta, Hal Far was built soon after WWI as a shore base for aircraft with the British Mediterranean Fleet. In the run-up to war Luqa, Ta Kali (Ta'Qali) and other small airstrips were first built by the RAF during 1940 and extensively expanded in the next three years.
- c. In Cyprus RAF Nicosia was constructed in the 1930s. Principally a military establishment at first, it was, in the event, little used being remote from the scene of major operations.

WORLD WAR II

21. In 1939, with WWII now imminent, Middle East Command comprised some 300 ac, including 14 Bomber Sqns and 5 Fighter Sqns equipped with Gloster Gladiators. To cover an area of 4 ½ million sq miles against Mussolini's 1200 ac seemed an impossible task to say the least.

22. Gibraltar. Gibraltar served a vital role controlling virtually all naval and air traffic into and out of the Mediterranean Sea from the west, and was the first link in the chain that led from the Straits, to the island fortress of Malta, and ultimately to Egypt and the Suez Canal. In late 1939 Construction of a solid-surface runway began on Gibraltar, and on 9 September 1939 No. 200 Squadron RAF was ordered to Gibraltar. As a reprisal for the attack on the French fleet at Mers el Kebir, Gibraltar came under aerial bombardment from Vichy French aircraft and was also subsequently attacked by Italian aircraft based on Sardinia.

23. Given its strategic importance, Germany made detailed plans to capture Gibraltar, primarily by air assault. The plan, codenamed 'Felix', was devised at the highest level of command and was signed by Adolf Hitler. It involved prompt entry through Spain (with or without permission) coupled with attacks driving the British out of the Western Mediterranean. With Gibraltar taken, the Strait would be effectively closed to the Allies, forcing all Mediterranean-bound Allied shipping to steam all the way around Africa. German

planners were confident an assault in January 1941 would yield victory. However, Franco's consent was not forthcoming and the operation was postponed, modified, and ultimately abandoned⁸.

24. Malta. Malta was strategically important because it hosted several airfields and was the only British harbour between Gibraltar and Alexandria. Malta was also essential for offensive operations against Axis supply convoys destined for North Africa. Invasion had been considered by the Germans, but in the end Crete was favoured. Instead a bombing campaign was mounted to neutralise Malta. The first attack came from Italy on 11 June 1940, and the arrival of the Luftwaffe in Sicily in 1941 intensified the campaign.

- a. During 1941 and 1942, more than 3,000 raids occurred. The towns surrounding the industrial areas around the harbours took a fearful pounding, and much of the population was evacuated. This was area bombing on a gigantic scale. Malta could not be allowed to fall.
- b. In the first six months of 1942, there was only one 24-hour period without air raids. The inhabitants were forced to lead a subterranean existence which caused severe health problems and eventually led to a typhoid epidemic. Casualties were high: 1,493 civilians died and 3,674 were wounded. Children suffered greatly.

25. The island was defended by fighter squadrons and resupplied at considerable cost. Indeed some historians have questioned whether Malta was used to support the 8th Army, or the 8th Army to support Malta! By the early summer of 1942, the island was cut off and suffering from severe shortages. Then the Germans made a strategic mistake: lulled into an early sense of victory, aircraft were diverted to fight on the Eastern Front, enabling 61 British Spitfires to be got through to Malta. Raids decreased and defences improved, but it wasn't until the arrival in August of a convoy from Alexandria that food was brought to the near-starving civilian population. By the following summer the siege was lifted as the Axis powers faced defeat in North Africa. However, the air siege of Malta was a "close run" thing. Had German pressure been maintained or even intensified, Malta may well have ceased to operate or even function at all – with perhaps decisive results for the North African campaign.

26. Taranto. The naval Battle of Taranto took place on the night of 11th November 1940. Waves of Swordfish attacked the Italian fleet as it lay at anchor in the harbour. During the attacks the battleship Littorio was hit by three torpedoes, while the battleships Conte di Cavour and Caio Duilio each received one, and bombs damaged a cruiser in the inner harbour. The Italian battleship fleet lost half its strength in one night.

27. Moreover, the RN decisively defeated the Italian fleet a few months later in the Battle of Cape Matapan (March 1941). Fairey Albacore torpedo bombers from HMS Formidable attacked the battleship Vittorio Veneto. Lieutenant-Commander Dalyell-Stead flew his Albacore to 1,000 yds from Vittorio Veneto, hitting it at the outer port propeller and causing 4,000 tons of water to be taken on. A third strike, by six Albacores and two Swordfish was made between 19:36 and 19:50. A torpedo crippled the cruiser Pola, forcing her to stop. Closing the distance, the Allies detected the Italians on radar shortly after 22:00, and

⁸ Perhaps the Germans missed a strategic opportunity, as in July 1942 Lieutenant General Dwight D. Eisenhower was appointed Allied Commander-in-Chief for Operation TORCH, the Combined invasion of Western North Africa. Gibraltar was a key component in this operation but, with Gibraltar in German hands, TORCH would have been almost impossible.

were able to close without detection, the Italians having no radar. The battleships Barham, Valiant and Warspite were able to close to 3,500 yds, unnoticed by the Italian ships. After just three minutes of firing two Italian heavy cruisers, Fiume and Zara, had been destroyed and 2 Italian destroyers (Vittorio Alfieri and Giosué Carducci) were sunk. Another two destroyers, Gioberti and Oriani, managed to escape, the former with heavy damage.

28. The effect of British carrier-launched aircraft on the Italian warships foreshadowed the end of the "big gun" battleship, as the attacks on the Prince of Wales and Repulse off Malaya in 1942, the destruction of the Bismarck and the surprise attack at Pearl Harbour were all to bear witness.

29. North Africa. On land, Air Power was also to demonstrate its potency. By Feb '41, the Italian thrust into Egypt had been defeated and British troops were re-deployed into Greece. Almost simultaneously Rommel was ordered to take command of the Afrika Korps in Tripoli. His initial attacks met with some success. Meanwhile, in Apr '41 Germany invaded Greece. Falling back, the Allied forces retrenched on Crete - which was considered at the time to be the strategic "Key to the Eastern Mediterranean". A seaborne invasion was confidently predicted by the Allies, despite the presence of a sizeable RN fleet off the coast. After a number of "Blue on Blue" losses, by the 18th May there were only 5 fighters left on Crete, 2 Hurricanes and 2 Gladiators on Heraklion, and 1 Hurricane at Maleme. In view of the sea assault, the decision was taken to withdraw them, and they flew back to Egypt just before the invasion started, one that came from the air, not from the sea! On the second day of the German air assault Maleme airfield fell; troops were rapidly deployed to theatre, and within a further 8 days the whole island was in German hands.

30. With Rommel's new thrust to the East across North Africa in 1942, the RAF under Air Marshal Coningham found itself squeezed into an ever smaller number of bases in Egypt and Palestine. But this concentration had advantages in terms of logistics, cooperation and commonality of tactics. After the second Battle of Alamein, the RAF moved forward with surprising speed to leap-frog into air bases across North Africa, and then into Tunisia. The theatre was nicknamed the "Battle of the Airfields" because the strength of each army was directly related to its air force's access to airfields. The Air Power of an advancing army diminished as it had to use unprepared airfields with long lines of communication while that of a retreating army increased as it fell back into prepared sites, complete with stockpiles. And when the winter rains arrived, the most forward armies lost much of their air support, as unprepared airfields became mud pits.

31. For the Allies there had been many air successes. Perhaps the first was the value of Air Superiority. With Air Superiority, everything became possible; without it all operations - ground as well as air - became "paralysed". The measure of success can be judged by the fact that in just one week, for example, the RAF flew 10,000 sorties, whilst the Axis managed just 3,000. Second was the re-rolling of fighters into the ground-attack role. When the need to attack tanks from the air was identified, it was clear that bombers would be too inaccurate so fighters were employed against them. A cannon was needed to penetrate the armour and the 40mm "S" gun was chosen with special AP ammunition. Two underwing cannons were fitted to the Hawker Hurricane fighters of 6 Squadron⁹, and the standard attack manoeuvre was to dive on the target from 5000 ft, which allowed the aircraft to get up to its maximum speed in the

⁹ Forever afterwards known as the "Can Openers" for their success against armoured vehicles.

dive. The pilot would fire off .303 rounds from his machine gun until they hit the target then would fire a pair of 40mm rounds. The process of firing and re-aiming could be done two or three times on each pass, giving a good pilot perhaps 2-3 hits on his target.

32. These aircraft served in North Africa from mid-1942 where they achieved considerable success; claims included 144 tanks hit, of which 47 were destroyed, plus nearly 200 other vehicles. During and following El Alamein six squadrons of Hurricanes claimed to have destroyed 39 tanks, 212 lorries and armoured troop-carriers, 26 bowzers, 42 guns, 200 various other vehicles and four small fuel and ammunition dumps. However, they didn't have it all their own way as they suffered heavy losses, from ground fire and they also lacked effectiveness against the heavily armoured Tiger tank.

33. Nevertheless, the combined effect of carpet bombing and strafing had its effect. As Rommel recorded in the Afrika Korps Diary:

“Officers and men were badly shaken and their fighting capacity considerably reduced by the enforced dispersal, lack of sleep and the strain of waiting for the bomb.”

Indeed, he went on to say:

“... anyone who has to fight, even with the most modern weapons, against an enemy in complete control of the air fights like a savage against modern European troops, under the same handicap, and with the same chance of success.”

34. Paradoxically and somewhat bizarrely, ground forces on **both** sides believed that the other side's Air Power was dominant. Even in the late stages of the campaign Allied soldiers complained of the devastating effects of the Luftwaffe, and this was at a time when the RAF had clear air superiority. This sober thought demonstrates well that the demoralising effect of being attacked is far greater than the positive psychological effect of seeing one's own Air Power in action.

35. With the Operation TORCH landings in French North Africa, an ever-increasing force of fighters, fighter-bombers and bombers was now concentrated against the stores and supply dumps of the enemy, his shipping in the Mediterranean, his airfields and his retreating armies. Supply had, in fact, proved to be the crux of the desert battle. Rommel's Afrika Korps was halted as much by a lack of fuel as by direct enemy action.

36. In the final battles in Tunisia, the Allied air forces destroyed the last attempt by the Germans to reinforce their ground forces by air from Sicily and, in turn, prevented the evacuation of those forces. In 3 weeks in April 1943, 432 enemy transport aircraft were destroyed for the loss of 35 fighters. By the end of the war the RAF had deployed further forward into Italy, with bases in Sardinia (Elmas), in Sicily and at several locations up and down the Italian mainland.

POST WAR

37. At the war's end, the RAF had a string of bases right across the Med, some well-found; others little more than a field. Through this area ran the vital Middle East oil pipelines and, of course, to the East the Suez Canal. Britain was still the mandate holder in Palestine, had permanent bases in Egypt and colonial

responsibilities for Gibraltar, Malta and Cyprus. Government aspirations at the time were to put the clock back to 1938, as if nothing had changed. But in its wake, WWII left the Eastern Mediterranean in a state of “chaos, bitterness and confusion.”

38. The Soviet Union had territorial and patronage ambitions in the whole area. And this stance, coupled with the US’ policy of anti-colonialism, progressively destabilised the area, encouraging extreme nationalist groupings as a counter to the ambitious communist cells in each of the occupied countries. British Forces in Greece which had trained and equipped the Royal Hellenic Air Force (RHAF) were ordered out by the end of 1946, and at the Italian Government’s insistence, RAF Forces in Italy were withdrawn in toto by the end of 1947.

39. In the wake of the Holocaust, some 1½ million European Jews wanted to move to Palestine; the Egyptians seemed determined to evict Britain at the earliest opportunity so they could overrun Sudan, and British Forces in the whole area demanded immediate repatriation, in places even going on strike to ram their point home! As soon as victory over Japan had been won, British Forces were drawn down at a rate that now looks foolhardy, creating a power vacuum. In just 4 months, in the autumn of ‘45, force levels were halved, creating a climate of indifference, and a real military vacuum that was sure to be filled.

40. Despite British Forces’ best attempts to stop them, Jewish refugees poured into Palestine, and the hostility created precipitated Britain’s abrogation of the Mandate, and her precipitate flight from Palestine in June ‘48. Ironically, this then drew the RAF forces in Egypt into a bizarre form of combat when Egyptian Spitfires attacked Israeli Spitfires, watched by British Spitfires! In the battles that followed the RAF seemed to be the enemy of both! At various times it seemed as if first the Israelis, then the Egyptians would attack the Canal bases. Then, on 16 Oct 51, Egypt abrogated the Defence Treaty; all Egyptian labour withdrew and riots occurred around the beleaguered British bases. In July 1952 the Colonels’ Revolt deposed King Farouk and in April 1954 Nasser became PM, determined to “liquidate the British occupation”. Negotiations followed and the British agreed to withdraw in toto within 20 months, but with the agreed option of returning if either Turkey or Iraq were attacked by the USSR. In April 1956, the last British Forces left Egypt.

CENTO AND THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

41. As events in Hungary would soon demonstrate, the USSR was an increasing threat in the region, and a Soviet thrust through the Caucasus was feared (obviously then not much changes here - cf 2008!). On 12 Jan 1955 the Turko-Iraqi Pact was signed, expanded on 4 Apr to include Britain as the nuclear guarantor, drawing in Iran and Pakistan as well into what became known first as the Baghdad Pact, and then as CENTO. Although the US was not a full member she contributed and supported the Pact. Modelled after the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), CENTO committed the nations to mutual cooperation and protection, as well as non-intervention in each other’s affairs. Its goal was to contain the Soviet Union by having a line of strong states along the USSR’s south-western frontier. Bearing in mind the sizeable armies already in Turkey, Iran and Pakistan, Britain’s principal contribution would be from the air, particularly a nuclear capability. Clearly, the withdrawal from Egypt would have to create an enormous build-up of forces in Cyprus, and RAF Nicosia would be inadequate. So in 1955, the decision was taken to build a new airbase, to full NATO standards, on the peninsula at Akrotiri. Completed on 1 Jan 1956, it became the centre for RAF operations, allowing Nicosia to evolve first into a transport base, and then into

the Civilian International Airport. Sadly, space does not permit the description of the events of Operation MUSKETEER, - the militarily successful, but diplomatically flawed, repossession of the Suez Canal Zone. But if it did anything, MUSKETEER underscored the importance of Cyprus and Malta as forward bases in the region. With the completion of Akrotiri, four new Canberra Sqns in the nuclear Strike role, together with PR support deployed in 1957, with a full nuclear capability being available from December 1961. In due course the TSR-2 was to have replaced the Canberra.

42. In the 50+ years since Suez, even this posture moved on. On July 14, 1958, the Iraqi monarchy was overthrown in a military coup and the king assassinated. The new government, led by General Qasim, withdrew from the Baghdad Pact, opened diplomatic relations with Soviet Union and adopted a non-aligned stance; Iraq quit the organization shortly thereafter. The organization dropped the now obsolete "Baghdad Pact" title in favour of CENTO.

43. In Libya, the RAF had occupied 3 permanent Italian AF bases, at Castel Benito near Tripoli, Benina, near Benghazi and El Adem 20 miles South of Tobruk. The first Yugoslav Sqn formed at Benina in 1945, before moving home to Yugoslavia. All of these bases were used as staging posts to repatriate troops from India, and El Adem was even used by BOAC in the post-war period. The treaty with Libya prevented the bases being used for MUSKETEER, but very soon the bases became hosts for weapons training. Sadly, in 1964 economic pressures forced the RAF to reduce its presence in Libya to just El Adem, and with Defence Review following Defence Review even El Adem was now in decline. However, on 1 Sep 69 a military coup ousted King Idris and the new regime, led by Col Gaddafi, insisted on RAF withdrawal. This was accomplished by 31 Mar 70.

44. Cyprus became independent in Aug 1960, but Britain retained 2 Sovereign Base Areas at Dhekelia and on the south coast at Episkopi/Akrotiri. As part of the 1966 Defence Review it was decided to replace the Canberras with 2 Sqns of Vulcans, and in Jan '69 all 4 Canberra Sqns were withdrawn. By 1970 Akrotiri was one of the largest and most important bases in the RAF. However, in 1974 Turkey invaded Cyprus and with a foreign army only some 50 miles away, the decision was taken to withdraw the nuclear weapons and the Vulcans.

45. Meanwhile, CENTO itself was in difficulties. Pakistan had asked for military support against India in 1965 and again in 1971, but this had been denied. The alliance finally collapsed when the Shah's departure prompted the withdrawal of Iran in 1979, shortly followed by Pakistan and Turkey, leaving the UK as the only member.

46. In 1964 Malta became independent and a 10-year Agreement on Mutual Defence, together with development aid of £50m, gave the British rights to use the bases. Canberra PR aircraft were moved in from Cyprus and 203 Sqn equipped with Shackleton ASW ac were deployed from Ballykelly in Northern Ireland, the Shackletons being replaced by Nimrods in 1971. Sadly, the 1967 Defence Review reduced the forces on Malta and the then Prime Minister of Malta began a process of renegotiating an increase in development aid to offset the loss of revenue from the drawdown. Amid bitter wrangling, the aid was increased and the offer of base facilities extended to 1979, but on 31 Mar 79 all RAF flying ceased in Malta, and the facilities became increasingly used by Libya.

CURRENT OPERATIONS

47. So, with that chapter closed and the RAF's presence much reduced did this mean the end of Air Power operations in the region? Clearly not, and let's just remind ourselves of some of the operations involving Air Power that took place in the region since WWII:

Year(s)	Conflict	Involving Cyprus?
1946	Greek Civil War	✓
1948	Berlin Blockade	
	Arab-Israeli War	✓
1950	(World Population now 2.3 Bn)	
1956	Suez – Op MUSKETEER	✓
	Soviet invasion of Hungary	✓
1967	6-day Arab- Israeli War	✓
1968	Czechoslovakia Invaded	
1973	Yom Kippur Arab- Israeli War	✓
1974	Turkish invasion of Cyprus	✓
1975	Civil War Lebanon – Syria invaded	✓
1980-88	Iran-Iraq War	
1982	Israel invades Lebanon - US in Beirut	✓
1986	Op EL DORADO CANYON – air attack on Libya.	
1991	1 st Gulf War (Op DESERT STORM)	✓
1991-1996	Operation PROVIDE COMFORT – defence of Kurds	✓
1993-99	Bosnia, and then Kosovo	
1996-2003	Establishment of Iraqi Northern No Fly Zone (Op NORTHERN WATCH)	✓
1994-99	Chechnya Campaigns	
1999	(World Population now 6 Bn)	
2003	Iraq War (Op OIF)	✓
	Darfur Conflict in Sudan	
2008	Russo-Georgian Conflict	✓

48. Of course, there have been many other conflicts elsewhere in the world, ranging from full-scale military engagements such as Korea and Vietnam to more minor events such as the Falklands Conflict or Sierra Leone. However, perhaps unsurprisingly, a large majority of operations have taken place within the area bounded by the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean. At briefings given at Incirlik AB in 1999 the then US commander (BG Dave Deptula) calculated that 75% of all post-WWII conflicts had taken place within unrefueled F-15E range of Incirlik Air Base - which is just 50nm from Cyprus.

49. What this table, and the thoughts of the USAF Commander, highlight so well is both the likelihood of conflict in this region, and Air Power's ability to intervene. Unlike in WWII where Cyprus was largely peripheral to the main areas of conflict, now it seems more like a strategic aircraft carrier situated deep in potentially hostile waters. Surrounded to the North, East and South by areas of instability, its position is truly strategically significant. Indeed, as the table shows, Cyprus and the forces on it have been involved to a greater or lesser extent in at least 14/21 conflicts that have taken place in this region since WW II.

LIMITATIONS

50. However, even given Cyprus' unique geo-strategic position, there are considerable limitations for its full utility as an effective military base and a contributor to world peace. The first of these stems from its physical location *vis-à-vis* neighbouring countries whose attitude to British national, Allied or NATO operations ranges from the often hostile (Syria) to the ambivalent (Israel) to the cooperative (Egypt). Given the location of Cyprus, the type and extent of air operations from the island are thus determined by the cooperation of the ring of nations that almost surround the island to the East. This means that operations from Cyprus are very much on a case by case basis. Some nations may tolerate overflight for a particular mission while others bar the way. A nation may also accept certain types of operations, but not others.

51. Electronically, of course, it is far more difficult for a non-cooperative neighbouring nation to prevent forces from utilising the electromagnetic spectrum for long range sensors. Given the range of these devices, and the passive nature of many sensors, Cyprus provides a useful platform from which to receive information from many parts of the world where there is instability and military or terrorist operations of interest.

52. While the Sovereign Base Areas are British national territory, HM Government normally takes account of Cypriot sensitivities when operating forces from its bases. For historical reasons, Cyprus is not a member of NATO while both Turkey and Greece are. It is a member of the EU, while Turkey is not. This institutional maze places limitations on the use of the Republic of Cyprus by NATO and even EU forces, compelling operations to be on a bilateral or multi-lateral basis out with the various treaties. As Katsikides and Charalambides have noted:

“The new political scene does not only affect Poland. It also affects Cyprus, which walks alone within the EU as it belongs neither to NATO nor to PfP (Partnership for Peace in Europe). Therefore, Cyprus cannot adequately participate in such a defensive deepening between NATO and ESDP, as it was decided by the European Council on December, 12 2008.

Consequently, Cyprus' remoteness from NATO and PfP turns the Republic away from and shrinks its active participation within the defensive institutions of the EU. Thus, the question, not only for Cyprus but also for other EU member-states and the EU as such, is whether a policy can be shaped and conducted in the context of national and common interests or on the basis of a dogmatic position derived from a gone era”¹⁰

REGIONAL RISKS

53. So will Cyprus, particularly the SBAs, continue to be of vital strategic importance? Clearly, much depends on the view of the strategic drivers for the rest of this century. Forecasting the future is, of course highly fraught, and many erudite organisations are paid millions to assess and predict the future. Sadly, they almost always get it wrong. So much so that none of the military operations that the UK has been involved in since WWII were predicted, or budgeted for. All have been resourced from standing forces allocated to other tasks. Indeed, it is almost a truism that wars are rarely predicted; and perhaps the reason

¹⁰ Savvas Katsikides and Yiannos Charalambides, NATO, *Cyprus & ESDP*, 3/19/2009. (Savvas Katsikides is Professor at the University of Cyprus and Yiannos Charalambides is a Political Scientist at the European Parliament.)

is simple. Conflicts that are analysed and predicted are normally addressed and negated before they flare up, either by deterrence or diplomacy. So the only wars left are those that have not been thought about or prevented. These then that remain are entirely unpredicted, uncatered for and virtually always causing surprise. So, expecting the unexpected requires nations to be prepared- having the infrastructure and weapons in being ready for any eventuality.

54. International Relations. That said, there are, nevertheless, some strategic pointers that might offer a clue as to the general nature and causes of war. First is the institutional problem. Historians tell us that one of the causes of the First World War was the system of secret bilateral interlocking treaties that existed in 1914, and that if just one of these treaties were invoked then it would in turn, just like a modern computer programme, activate another and another with the result that the whole continent would inevitably be drawn into war.

55. In more modern times it is salutary to think of how close to war the countries of NATO and the Warsaw Pact came on occasions. How just one event such as the Cuba Missile Crisis or the Gary Powers U-2 incident brought the world to the brink of destruction. Now, of course, the bipolar stability of the Iron Curtain has been replaced multipolarity with several new regional powers, often sadly, supported by the threat of nuclear weapons. And many of these new nuclear states are in range of the Eastern Mediterranean. Israel, India and Pakistan are already acknowledged nuclear powers, with Iran and possibly even Syria attempting to procure or produce such weapons.

56. Moreover, many of the nations in the region are also highly underdeveloped, with burgeoning populations and declining economies. This creates deep-rooted envy manifested paradoxically in both a desire to destroy the West, whilst at the same time a popular desire to migrate to enjoy all the West has to offer. Such actors often encourage religious fanaticism, becoming the patrons of terrorism, a coercive modus operandi they can employ through acolytes or third parties with virtual impunity. Whereas, the solid Iron Curtain of the Cold War kept its peoples in, the new version is more a weedy Green Hedge, running the length of the Mahgreb, through which a new form of mass migration¹¹ threatens Europe.

57. Population. The second, and arguably the most influential strategic driver is that of population growth itself. As Dr Edward Lutwak has pointed out, if a population suddenly increases in size, and the growth cannot be supported from local resources then this imbalance will always self-correct, by famine, plague, migration or war. As he has noted, sudden population growths are often succeeded 20 years later by bloody wars.

58. World population has been increasing logarithmically since 1900 and, despite the carnage of World War I, the mass 'flu epidemic that followed it or the slaughter of World War II, nothing has reduced its explosive climb, prompting pundits to suggest (incorrectly) that there are more people alive now – than have ever lived. In 1998 the UN population growth graph¹² showed that virtually all the growth would take place in less developed countries, many of whom, of course border the Eastern Mediterranean to the East or South. Growth would, however, plateau from 2050 onwards when it was assumed that population would peak at about 11 Bn.

¹¹ Perhaps the Sea Peoples in reverse!

¹² UN World Population Prospects 1998

59. World population has already passed 6.8Bn, with much of the population growth occurring in Middle-Eastern countries, where GDP growth is often less than population growth and the people will, as a result, become poorer. Many territories in the region are recognised as failed states, lack effective government (e.g. Pakistan) or live on charity (e.g. Gaza). The UN currently predicts that the world population will rise to about 10Bn where it will level off and plateau at no more than 11Bn. Now, in the latest population assessment the UN has elaborated the plateau effect rather more, showing that it depends entirely on fertility predictions amongst the peoples of the less developed countries. On the one hand, if fertility rates continue along similar lines to those now, then world population will continue to increase at a more or less constant rate, reaching 11 Bn by 2050 and then doubling every 40 to 50 years. Conversely, if fertility can be reduced then the gradient starts to level off by 2050.

60. Optimists point out that much depends on education for women, who are then persuaded to use contraception to control their fertility, whilst others point out that this, is difficult to achieve. The Catholic Church is opposed to contraception; many Black Africans regard contraception as medical imperialism; and Muslim countries encourage polygamy and large families. According to Chatham House¹³:

“A revolution in agriculture will be needed to meet a projected 50 per cent increase in demand for food by 2030.... What we're seeing now is just the start of a multi-decade challenge: feeding a global population set to approach ten billion by 2050, in the face of climate change, tighter energy supply, and growing competition for land and water resources”

RESOURCES

61. Water. Since humans consume resources, it is worth considering where those resources are under the most stress. First is water. Somewhat perversely, the highest population growth rates seem to occur in areas where water is in the shortest supply. With water in the region at a premium, with flow rates down the Nile already reduced, with competition for the Jordan River and with instability around the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the situation is likely to lead to competition, if not conflict. Some literature has identified a new form of power broker, the so called “hydro hegemon”, states who because of their superior position control the flow of water into neighbouring countries, such countries are Turkey, Israel and Kazakhstan to name but a few.

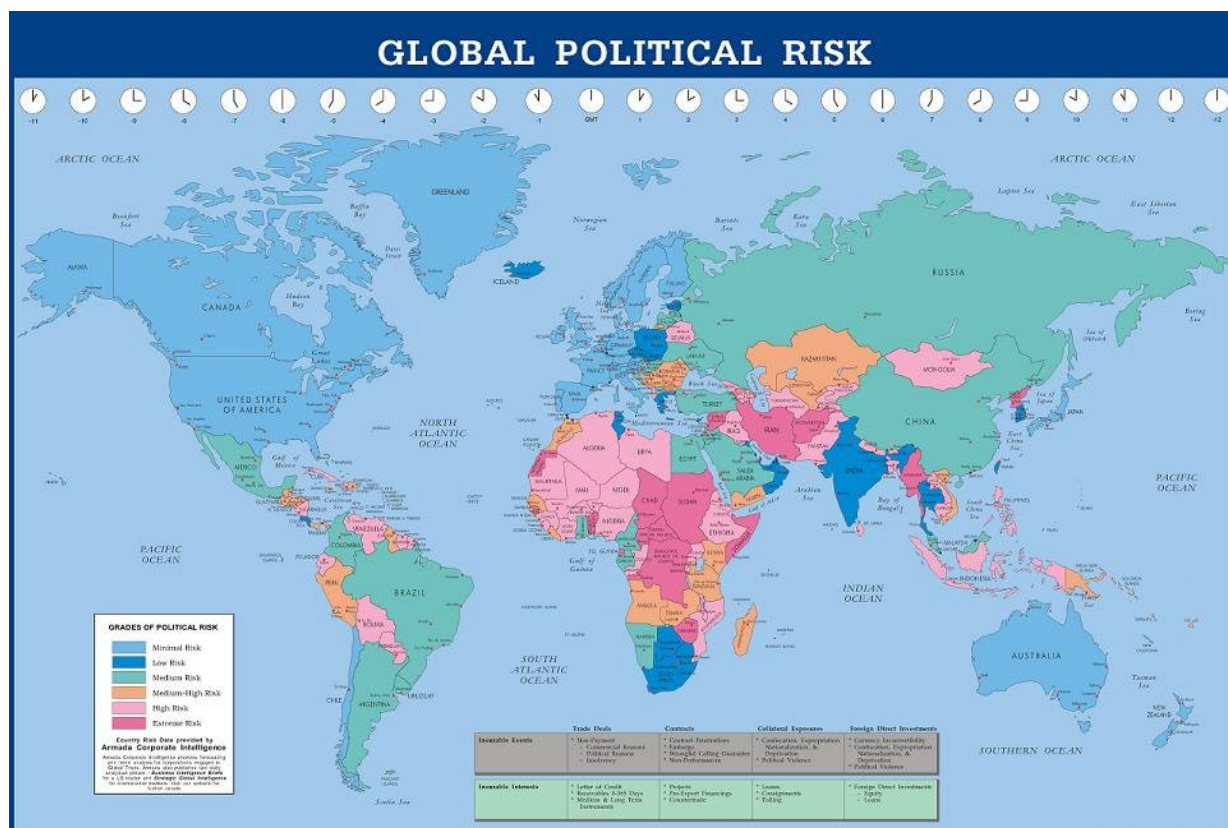
62. Oil. Finally, of course, one cannot ignore the oil situation. Despite there being a temporary glut – largely because of the world recession – this will not last. As population increases, as many nations become richer, so the demand is certain to increase. At maximum rates of production, and with the most stringent economy measures, all the current estimates point to a worsening supply gap from 2015 with price being the only limit on demand, and figures of perhaps \$200 or maybe even \$400 per barrel being quoted. Effective alternatives still seem a long way off, and even at the most optimistic rate of introduction are unlikely to offset the growing demand. Oil will thus progressively become unaffordable for many, and probably subject increasingly to the vagaries of political corruption. Shortages will thus become of increasing concern, leading to stronger and stronger competition. And Cyprus, of course, is right on the

¹³ *Rising Food Prices: Drivers and Implications for Development* by Alex Evans, Chatham House 20 Apr 2008

edge of the oil area, and when the Ceyhan oil pipeline comes on full stream, it will sit astride one of the principal global oil routes.

63. It is clear, therefore, that the competition for ever declining resources is likely to increase, leading almost inevitably to conflict somewhere in the area. This conflict is likely to be localised, at least initially, and confined to those areas where population growth yields a surplus population that cannot adequately be provided for¹⁴. No doubt, as well, any conflict would also be exacerbated by religious tension.

64. Though it is always difficult to predict conflict accurately, a guide to the future can be found from studying those areas where tension is already high, where conflict is already taking place, or where the risk factors are particularly high. The map below¹⁵ depicts current high-risk areas:



¹⁴ In the Gaza strip, for example, a population of 80,000 in 1948 has risen to 1.45m and could easily reach 4m, all these confined to an area very similar in size to the “pan-handle” of Cyprus.

¹⁵ ©Newstead Group – specializing in Political Risks

ROLE OF CYPRUS

65. As this map makes clear, the island of Cyprus is almost at the centre of a vortex of instability. It is thus supremely well situated for supporting operations both in the Middle-East and South, into Africa. Located as it is at the normal maximum range for most Air Transport assets operating from the UK¹⁶, Cyprus provides an invaluable stepping stone for onward flight to theatres as far away as India or Africa¹⁷. For humanitarian relief, civilian evacuation from warzones or for support of an army in the field Cyprus is ideally located. Although few attack or Recce missions would be flown directly from Cyprus, operations into Palestine, the Sinai, or with Air to Air refuelling, much further, to Iran/Afghanistan or beyond are entirely possible. As an air platform, as an unsinkable aircraft carrier, Cyprus' potential is clear. But at present this potential is only realised by Britain and, to a lesser extent, the USA.

66. Given its strategic location, Cyprus cannot, however, remain on the sidelines, hoping that war will pass her by as it did in WWII, hoping to remain immune to all the conflicts that potentially surround her. A unilateral, pacifist or non-aligned stance is hardly appropriate given her links with Greece, Turkey, Britain and the EU. Indeed any attempt by Cyprus to withdraw from regional conflagration could actually precipitate the very situation she might fear most – invasion or exploitation by a hostile power with few scruples – perhaps a re-run of 1570! Far better, therefore, for Cyprus to grasp the initiative, recognise her geo-strategic potential, and take the lead in securing her future as a vital contributor amongst the Western nations.

* * *

¹⁶ E.g. C-130 or A-400M.

¹⁷ Despite the increasing use of C-17s or chartered long-range transports, it would be costly to use such aircraft alone to support a full campaign, and the existing fleet would still be employed for all but the most time-critical items.