# The British 1918 Campaign in Palestine: A Perspective for Multi-Domain Operations

**GEN Edmund Allenby enters Jerusalem on foot.**

**by MAJ Kyle Trottier**

In 1918 GEN Edmund Allenby led the British Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF) on a campaign of more than 400 miles in 36 days, leading to destruction of the Ottoman Empire and securing the British geopolitical position in the Middle East for decades afterward. What can future Cavalry and Armor formations learn from this campaign to be better postured to win a large-scale combat operation (LSCO) against a near-peer adversary in the conduct of multi-domain operations (MDO)?

Using the MDO's *compete, penetrate, dis-integrate,*[1] *exploit* and *re-compete* framework, it is first important to understand how the EEF used its mounted formations – supported by air, naval and irregular forces – to penetrate the German and Ottoman defense, then dis-integrate the adversary in depth.

Second, the EEF provides insight into the ways that commanders can use multi-domain deception to draw the strength of the adversary in one direction, creating a vulnerable seam by which mounted forces can penetrate.

Third, Allenby provides excellent examples of how to employ information operations to influence the battle of narrative and perception to strengthen the will of friendly forces and political authorities while degrading enemy morale and the will to fight.

Considered together, these examples provide ways for current Armor and Cavalry leaders to think about how to man, train and equip the force to win in future MDOs.

## Facing the Ottomans

For nearly 600 years, the Ottoman Empire controlled Palestine, Egypt and Mesopotamia as part of the caliphate. Between 1805-1846, Mohamed Ali, the viceroy of Egypt, led his state through a period of modernization, including industrial, economic, political, social, military and education reforms.[2] During this period, British companies began to invest in Egyptian industries, especially agriculture.

**Figures 1 and 2. Competing empires. Figure 1 shows the powerful Ottoman Empire as of 1913, represented in green.**

This period can be defined as one of "great-power competition," where the British Empire ranged from Africa to India to the Caribbean and was competing against other world powers like Russia, Germany, France and the Ottoman Empire for geopolitical and economic primacy.

In 1869, the Suez Canal opened for traffic and became the great artery of the British Empire connecting Europe, Africa and Asia. The Suez Canal made commerce between India and Europe faster, more reliable and more affordable. Thus, whoever held this key terrain held significant leverage across multiple continents and could influence world economic affairs.
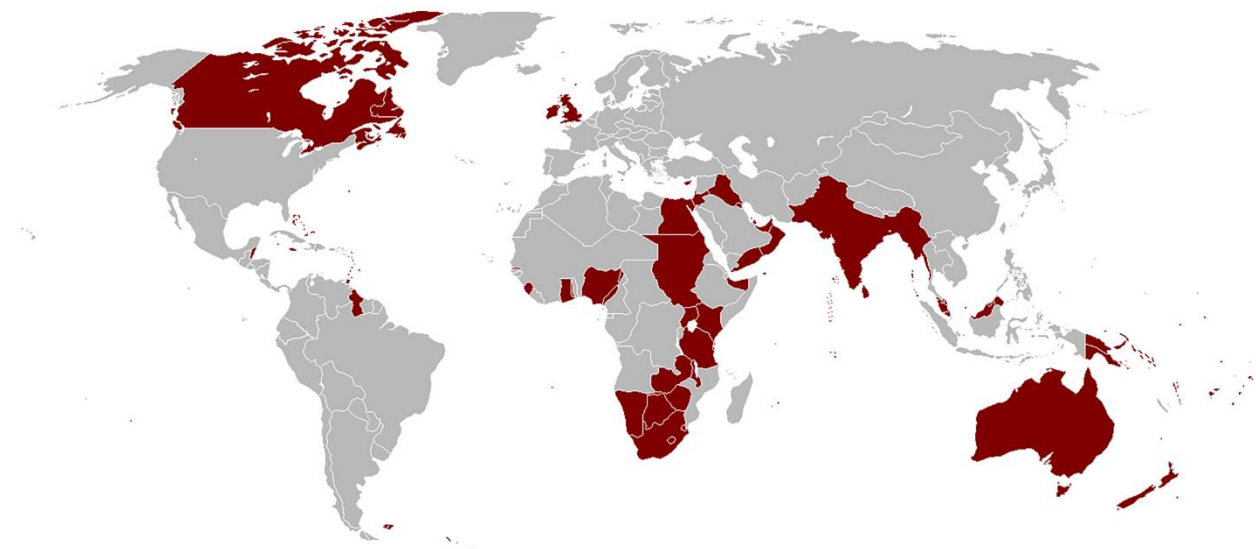


**Figure 2. The British Empire at its territorial peak in 1921, shown in burgundy. British interests spanned multiple continents and sometimes conflicted with the Ottoman Empire and other European "great powers."**

The outbreak of war in August 1914 saw Germany negotiating with the Ottoman Empire to enter the conflict on the side of the Central Powers. For the Ottomans, this was a way to restore the dominance of Egypt and the Suez Canal. For Germany, Ottoman control of the Suez was an indirect approach to draw British combat power away from Europe.[3]

The two sides agreed to form a combined army called the Yilderim (meaning "thunder"). The German army provided officers to command Ottoman battalions, divisions and corps, and to lead their staffs. They also provided modern military hardware and the technical experts for the implementation of such equipment.

From 1914 to 1916 the British, led by GEN Archibald Murray, were content with merely defending the Suez Canal. In 1916, after the Yilderim conducted a series of attacks that failed to seize the Suez, the British went on the offensive. They determined "the best way to defend the Suez Canal, Egypt and the Empire was to establish a permanent defense in Palestine."[4]

By Dec. 21, 1916 the British had attacked and seized El Arish and the naval port in Rafa, securing all of the Sinai and the Suez Canal. But the Yilderim defeated two EEF frontal assaults to seize Gaza in March 1917, leading to a stalemate.
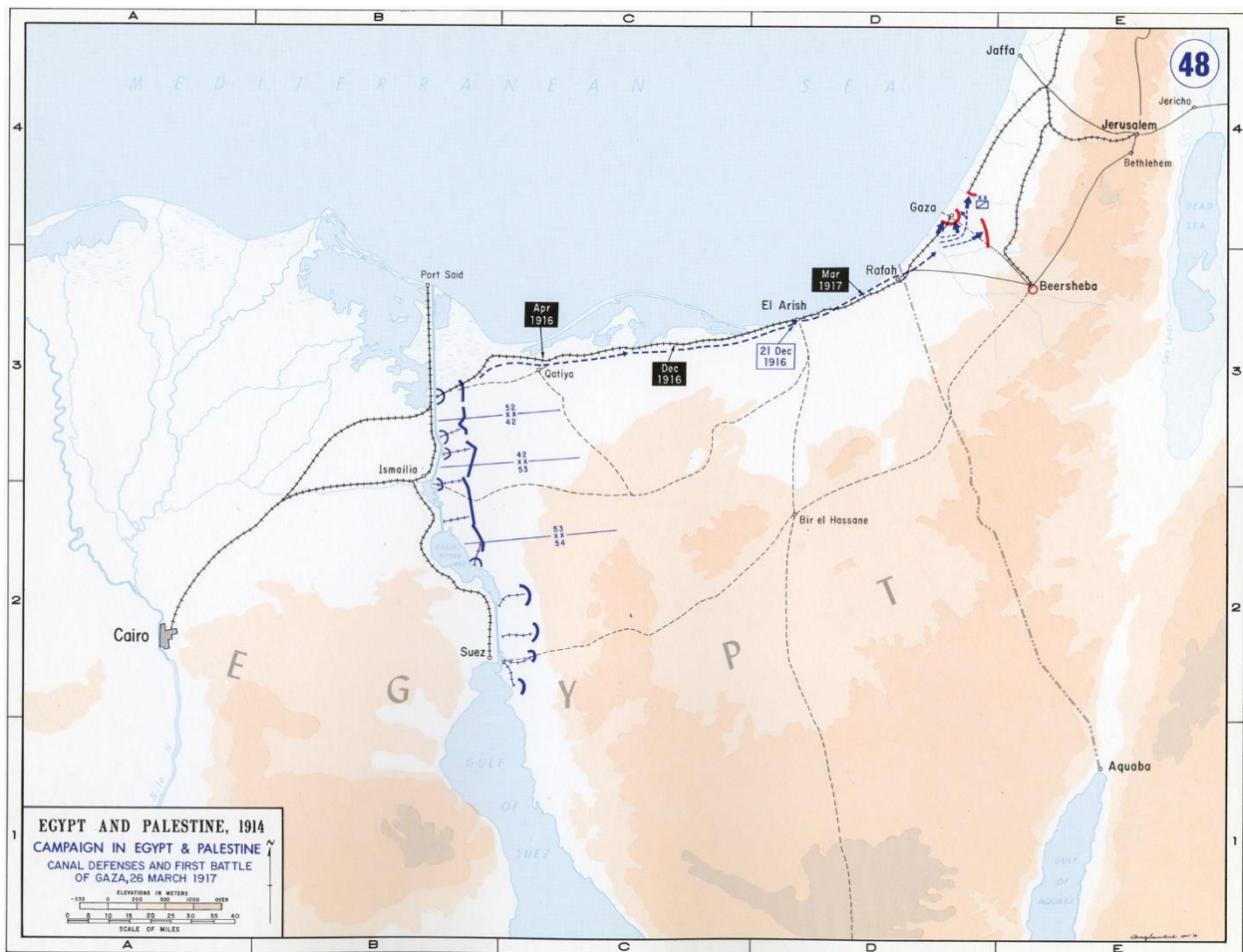


**Figure 3a. The EEF's early campaign, pushing from the Suez Canal into Palestine, 1917.** *(Map courtesy of the U.S. Military Academy Department of History; source: https://www.westpoint.edu/sites/default/files/inline-images/academics/academic_departments/history/WWI/WWOne48.jpg)*

Following his failure to win the campaign, Murray was replaced by GEN Edmund Allenby. Allenby, a career cavalryman and veteran of mobile warfare in the Boer Wars, understood modern industrial warfare. His most

recent posting, serving as commander of 3<sup>rd</sup> Army in France from 1915-1917, solidified his understanding of modern, mobile industrial warfare.

Upon assuming command, Allenby gained control of the XX and XXI Infantry Corps, a cavalry corps (Desert Mounted Corps, or DMC), an artillery corps and the Royal Air Force (RAF). Allenby also gained control of T.E. Lawrence's and Sherif Feisal's Arab army. Allenby quickly reorganized and retrained the EEF to conduct a rapid attack from Gaza to Aleppo, a distance of 435 miles. In doing so, Allenby leveraged MDO to defeat the German and Ottoman forces and destroy the caliphate. Allenby also secured the British Empire's geopolitical interests for decades to come.

The following sections explain Allenby's actions in greater detail.

## Penetration and dis-integration

Allenby's first action was the 60-day battle (Oct. 28-Dec. 31, 1917) often referred to as the Third Gaza Campaign. This operation ended with the seizure of the port of Jaffa and Ottoman General Headquarters in Jerusalem.



**Figure 3b. British battles from Third Battle of Gaza to capture of Jerusalem, 1917.** *(Map courtesy of the U.S. Military Academy Department of History; source: https://www.westpoint.edu/sites/default/files/inline-images/academics/academic_departments/history/WWI/WWOne49.jpg)*

Following Third Gaza's success, Allenby took an operational pause. This paused was linked to the EEF's receipt of orders to send multiple units to Europe and the requirement for it to integrate replacements from other parts of the British Empire. During this period, the EEF staff and subordinate units planned and trained to conduct cross-domain maneuver, which included the integration and convergence of the RAF and DMC.[5] Together they would

conduct rapid maneuver to exploit a position of relative advantage created through information operations and deception.

To penetrate the Ottoman defense, Allenby employed joint fires from British and French naval gunfire along the Mediterranean, as well as RAF bomber strikes targeting German headquarters in Nazareth. The focus of these strikes was to destroy German command-and-control (C2) nodes in Nazareth. The artillery corps suppressed Ottoman artillery with an overwhelming volume of fires.

With the successful suppression of German C2 and fires capabilities, the DMC unleashed 4,000 cavalrymen, who overwhelmed the German forces at El Affule, Beisan and Nazareth within 36 hours. The DMC seized the German headquarters in Nazareth in the early morning hours of Sept. 20, capturing more than 2,000 prisoners. As historian W.T. Massey notes, "The entry into Nazareth was such a surprise to the enemy that some members of Limon von Sanders' staff were captured in their pajamas."[6]
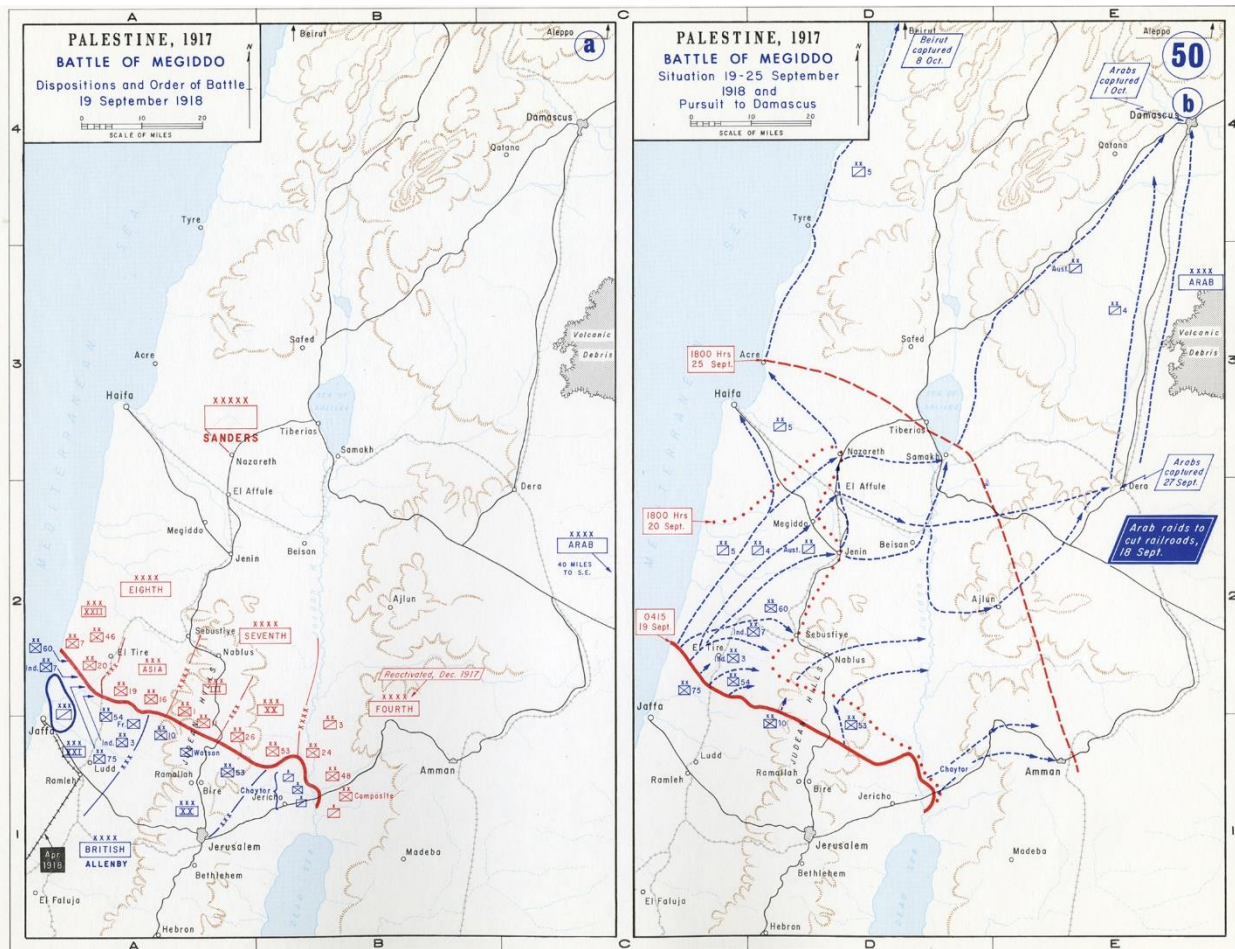


Figure 4. Penetration and dis-integration of Ottoman Empire. *(Map courtesy of the U.S. Military Academy Department of History; source: https://www.westpoint.edu/sites/default/files/inline-images/academics/academic_departments/history/WWI/WWOne50.jpg)*

Throughout this operation, the RAF and DMC enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship. The DMC often relied on the aerial reconnaissance and photography of the RAF to maneuver in areas beyond their map sheets.[7] The RAF, with air superiority, supported the campaign through the conduct of aerial fighting, bombing and reconnaissance. The convergence of RAF and DMC enabled a successful guard operation ahead of the XX and XXI Infantry Corps. That guard operation secured key lines of communication and prevented the enemy from disrupting the formation's tempo. The joint integration of reconnaissance and security operations was a key contributor to their rapid success.

Following the DMC's successful seizure of Nazareth, El Affule and Beisan, and the Arab army's seizure of Dera, the British took control of the Ottoman force's ground lines of communication. They set an anvil for the infantry and artillery to hammer against. The DMC's penetration and dis-integration of German and Ottoman C2 fires capabilities enabled Allenby's XX and XXI Corps to further destroy the Ottoman army.

Having obtained a position of relative advantage, the EEF exploited its penetration into German- and Ottoman-held territory and conducted a vigorous pursuit. This pursuit resulted in the seizure of Damascus and Aleppo Sept. 30, 1918, and Oct. 26, 1918, respectively. Furthermore, the campaign resulted in the surrender of the Ottoman Empire Oct. 30, 1918.

## Deception

Field Manual (FM) 3-13.4, *Army Support to Military Deception*, states, "When properly resourced and integrated, deception has the potential to deter or induce actions that are favorable to the force and can increase the success of friendly activity. Successfully planned deceptions give commanders the ability to act faster than the enemy can make decisions, creating positions of relative advantage."[8] Allenby used a massive deception to create favorable conditions for penetrating the Ottoman defense along the western coast. Allenby massed his army in the east, near Jericho, and made every indication that his plan was to attack along the Jordan River Valley.

However, one week before the attack, Allenby leveraged the intervening periods of darkness to displace four divisions – one infantry and three cavalry – from the area around Jericho to Jaffa. The three cavalry divisions left their tents, shelters, horse lines and camps untouched after the men ceased to occupy them.[9] They even erected extra shelters and emplaced props to look like people and horses. The result was a German aerial reconnaissance report to von Sanders (commander of the Yilderman) on the 17th that said: "Far from being any diminution in the cavalry in the Jordan Valley, there was evidence of two or three more squadrons."[10]

The ability to employ props to provide a visual indicator to enemy aerial reconnaissance reinforced the German belief that the main attack would be in the east along the Jordan River Valley and thus they weighted their main effort in those locations. Allenby played to the known bias of the German officers and gave every indication their intuition was right. That is, until he exploited this false notion by penetrating the German defense along the western coast line and seizing their headquarters while they slept.

The cross-domain integration of deception created a temporal position of relative advantage the DMC would use to penetrate and then exploit the Ottoman defense.

## Information operations

FM 3-13, *Information Operations*, states that "conflict is fundamentally a contest of wills and information operations are intended to influence, disrupt, corrupt or usurp enemy or adversary decision-making and everything that enables it while enabling and protecting friendly decision-making." [11] Allenby and Lawrence understood this well.

Lawrence was keenly aware of the global audience and the need to demonstrate legitimacy of the Arab cause to continue receiving support from London. He later wrote, "The printing press, and each newly discovered method of communication favored the intellectual above the physical."[12] Allenby and Lawrence looked to exploit the technological capabilities of this era to favorably influence public perception in their favor.

Quick on the heels of each victory, Allenby and Lawrence generated press releases for broadcast across the entire British Empire. The influence of this was devastating to the Ottoman cause. The British owned all major printing publications and radio-broadcast companies in the Middle East, and they were all networked to other publications across the Empire. Thus, from London to Africa to India, the British controlled the means to influence public opinion. It did so through newspapers like *Al Mokattam,* whose reputation was so high that during the war it was a deadly crime in the eyes of the Germans or Ottomans to possess a copy."[13]

As Ottoman morale dropped, German officers advocated flogging and many other overbearing or brutal forms of correction.[14] This created such animosity between the officers and their soldiers that "all German officers were to have a weapon on them at all times so as not to be in a defenseless position."[15] English propaganda contributed to

degrade enemy morale by avowing, "The British were simply and solely carrying on the war against the Turks to drive the Germans from the soil of Islam."[16]

The facts that most of the EEF were Muslims from across the Empire and that Sherif Feisal's army joined the coalition legitimized this message and helped counter claims of another Crusade. Further, it bolstered active and passive support from the local populace and made it difficult for German soldiers to conduct any activities in public for fear of reprisal. As a result of coherent and well-structured information operations, Allenby won the strategic narrative and public perception against his foes.

To further the British narrative that the British were liberators to help free the Palestinians from the oppressive Germans, Allenby ensured that Muslim soldiers were always the first to enter a city. For example, upon seizing Damascus, all British forces established an outer cordon while the Arab army entered the city. In the case of Jerusalem and Nazareth, Muslim regiments from the Empire were the first to enter and make contact with local leaders. Even when Allenby entered Jerusalem, it was on foot to ensure it was not a grand or triumphant entrance of a conqueror.[17]

The result of months of focused information operations degraded the will of the enemy to fight, disrupted Ottoman decision-making cycles and preserved friendly combat power by ensuring local citizens and the global audience viewed their operation favorably. Like the successful deception operation, the timely and precise application of information operations helped create and preserve a position of relative advantage to enable the penetration and exploitation of the Ottoman defense. It also was a significant factor leading to the Ottoman surrender and enabled the British Empire to re-compete in great-power competition on favorable geopolitical terms within the Middle East for the next two decades.



**Figure 5. Australian light horsemen of the DMC. After the Third Battle of Gaza, Allenby wished to surprise Beersheba's defenders with an attack. One of the first steps in capturing the town was employing information**

**operations to divert German/Ottoman attention elsewhere: Allenby sent out false radio messages prompting Turkish forces to think the British were going to attack Gaza. After that, one brave intelligence officer, COL Richard Meinertzhagen, rode up to the Turkish line, barely evading capture. In the fray, he dropped a bloodstained bag, smeared with horse blood, with fake military plans in it. The plans falsely described how the British force was on its way to capture Gaza. More radio messages threatening Meinertzhagen made up the Turkish army's mind: the British army was going to attack Gaza. Instead, the British went through with capturing Beersheba. As Allenby recalled, "The Turks at Beersheba were undoubtedly taken completely by surprise, a surprise from which the dash of London troops and Yeomanry, finely supported by their artillery, never gave them time to recover. The charge of the Australian Light Horse completed their defeat."**

## Conclusion

From 1805 to 1914, the British and Ottoman empires were locked in great-power competition for control of the Middle East. When the Ottoman Empire allied with Germany, the competition escalated into LSCO. Allenby employed deception and information operations to create an opportunity for the EEF to penetrate and dis-integrate the Yildermen through the application of cross-domain maneuver. The decisive victory put the British Empire in a position to re-compete for decades under favorable political conditions. This way of thinking and operating is what MDO demands of future Armor and Cavalry leaders.

While MDO is primarily focused on defeating anti-access area-denial systems through the employment of lethal and non-lethal strike capabilities, the Armor and Cavalry community must retain a credible force capable of penetrating and destroying key targets, including enemy long-range fires and air-defense artillery (ADA). Mounted formations provide viable alternatives to contested air, space or cyberspace domains.

Modernization efforts must not only continue to focus on mobility, protection and firepower for platform design, but must put significant consideration into ensuring platforms are simple, reliable and sustainable through contested lines of communication. True, exquisite technology can be a game-changer with regard to early identification of a threat and delivery of precision fires, yet all those technologies also make platforms harder to maintain – this tension must be balanced.

The limiting factor for ensuring the mounted formation can rapidly close large distances is a matter of sustainment. The DMC closed a 60-mile distance in 36 hours on horseback. That is roughly twice the distance of the Central Corridor at the National Training Center in 36 hours in a contested environment. The future mounted formation will need to be prepared to do this and more to destroy medium- and long-range fires and ADA targets.

Deception enabled Allenby to mislead German leaders into believing he would attack in the east. He produced conditions where joint fires struck to create the opening Allenby required to penetrate the enemy defense. Today's Armor formations also need decoys that can provide visual and signal replication. Whether Allenby in 1918 or Patton's fake army in England in 1944, decoys are a proven method of deception.

Expendable decoys could potentially absorb enemy long- and medium-range fire strikes in lieu of actual formations. This would enable the fires enterprise to then rapidly acquire and destroy enemy launch capabilities. Having the freedom to leave a replica formation and create false communications signatures creates temporal positions of relative advantage required to defeat a near-peer adversary and preserves combat power.

Information operations have proven throughout history to create advantages and opportunities for commanders to win battles. Today there are simply more mediums through space and cyberspace to send and receive information.

Allenby understood the importance of dominating the narrative on the local battlefield, with domestic audiences and with the greater international community. He worked aggressively to provide timely and accurate delivery of updates and publications to continually control the narrative.

Beyond that, MDO assumes future operations will not only be joint but multinational. Understanding the strategic impacts of every action is the responsibility of each leader. Humility to recognize who is the appropriate person or formation for specific missions, like entering a city, will set conditions for a successful transition. In each case, before Allenby's EEF secured a key population center, he had a deliberate plan to transition civil authority to an

Egyptian or Arab leader who would serve as the temporary governor until terms of settlement with the Ottoman Empire were reached.

This not only allowed his combat forces to more rapidly continue their attack north with secure rear lines of communication but also enabled the British to move to the fifth phase of MDO, "re-compete" under favorable conditions.

Allenby was able to arrange tactical actions in time, space and purpose to achieve a strategic goal. He won the tactical fight to enable political settlement and allow the British Empire to move back into a period of re-competition on favorable terms with world powers. For Armor and Cavalry leaders, it is important to have trained, fit and disciplined forces able to provide mounted-maneuver solutions to senior leaders in executing MDO.

Armor and Cavalry formations must have:

- The right platform that is readily maintained and sustained across large distances;
- Methods and tools for conducting deception operations to preserve the force and enable freedom of maneuver; and
- Intelligent and perceptive leaders who are able to help plan and integrate information operations to influence enemy or adversary decision-making while enabling and protecting friendly forces.

It is in these three ways Armor and Cavalry leaders can apply the EEF campaign of 1918 to future MDO in the 21st Century.

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## Notes

[1] According to U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command Pamphlet 525-3-1, **The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028**, the usage of the term "dis-integrate" (vs. "disintegrate") has a specific meaning. Per a footnote in the document, "*Dis-integrate* refers to breaking the coherence of the enemy's system by destroying or disrupting its subcomponents (such as command-and-control means, intelligence collection, critical nodes, etc.), degrading its ability to conduct operations while leading to a rapid collapse of the enemy's capabilities or will to fight. This definition revises the current doctrinal defeat mechanism *disintegrate*."

[2] Helen A.B. Rivlin, "Muhannad 'Ali," **Encyclopedia Britannica**; accessed Oct. 3, 2020, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Muhammad-Ali-pasha-and-viceroy-of-Egypt.

[3] Henry O. Lock, **With the British Army in the Holy Land**, London: Roxburghe House, 1919.

[4] Ibid.

[5] **The U.S. Army Functional Concept for Movement and Maneuver 2020-2040** defines cross-domain maneuver as "the employment of mutually supporting lethal and nonlethal capabilities in multiple domains to generate overmatch, present multiple dilemmas to the enemy and enable Joint Force freedom of movement and action*."*

[6] William T. Massey, **Allenby's Final Triumph**, London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1920.

[7] Ibid.

[8] FM 3-14.4, **Army Support to Military Deception**, February 2019.

[9] Massey.

[10] Ibid.

[11] FM 3-13, **Information Operations**, December 2016.

[12] T.E. Lawrence, **Seven Pillars of Wisdom**, United Kingdom, 1926.

[13] Massey.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] James E. Kitchen, **The British Imperial Army In The Middle East**, London: Bloomsbury Academic Publishing PLC, 2014.

## Acronym Quick-Scan

**ABCT** – armor brigade combat team
**ADA** – air-defense artillery
**C2 –** command and control
**EEF** – Egyptian Expeditionary Force
**DMC** – Desert Mounted Corps
**FM** – field manual
**LSCO** – large-scale combat operation
**MDO** – multi-domain operation
**RAF** – Royal Air Force