

THE LINK UP: ANGLO-SOVIET INVASION OF PERSIA

Persia, August/September 1941

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Syria, Iraq, and Persia were the three vital keys to the oilfields of the Middle East. By the middle of June 1941, Axis intervention had been forestalled in Iraq, and the Allies had begun the invasion of Vichy Syria. But when 'Barbarossa' came, Persia was still a danger area for the Allies, and the first military co-operation of Soviet Russia with the West was an invasion to safeguard that area

On the outbreak of the Second World War, Persia declared its neutrality. Reza Shah, who had successfully curbed Russian and British interference in his country's internal affairs and had also entered into extensive 'aid for trade' commitments with Germany, announced his intention to maintain friendly relations with all the great powers.

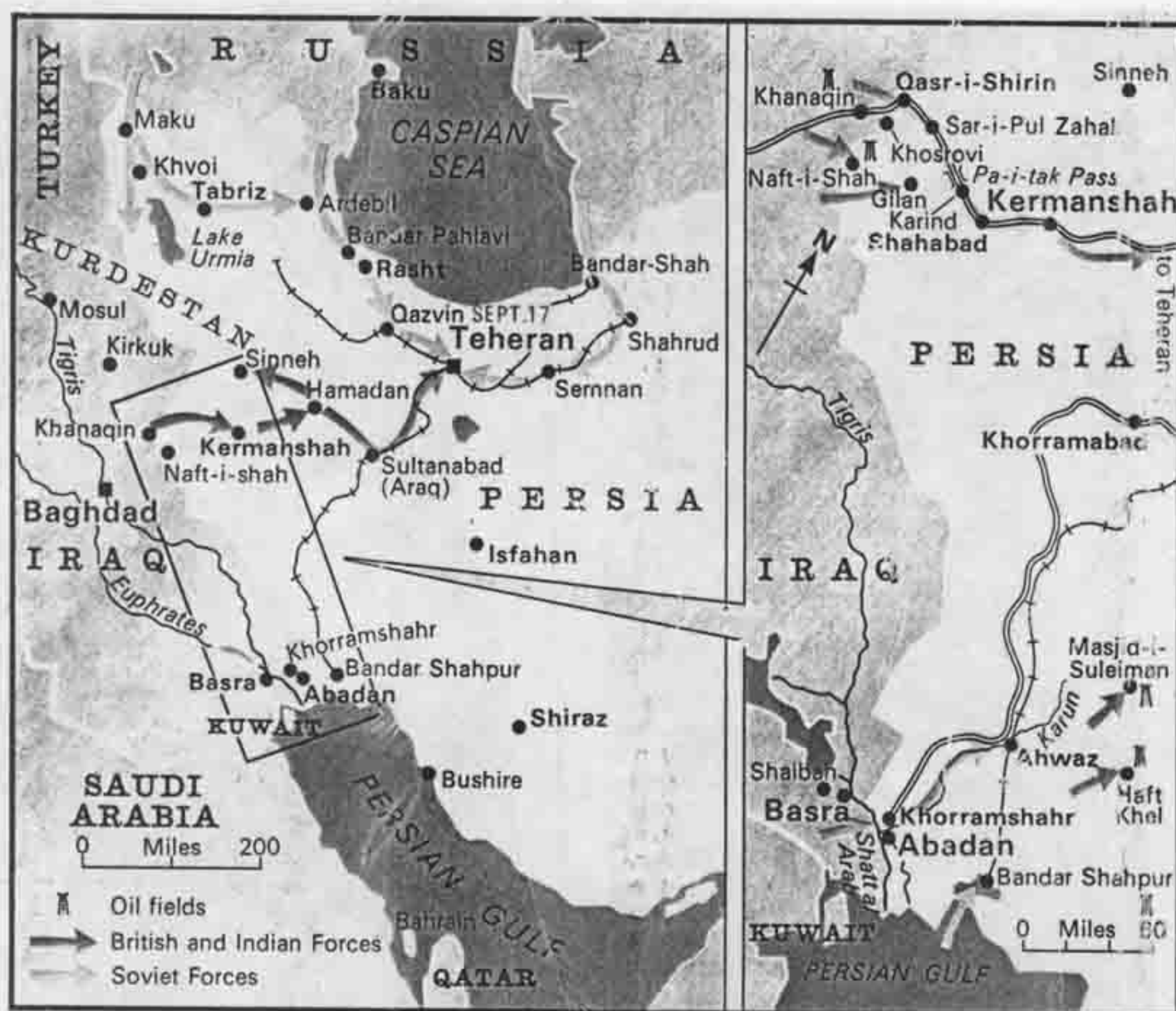
The Anglo-Soviet invasion of Persia in August 1941—violation of neutral sovereignty though it undoubtedly was—could hardly have come as a surprise to anyone—and least of all to the Shah himself. For over 100 years, with the exception of the 20 years of Reza Shah's own reign, Persia had been torn between the conflicting interests of Britain and Russia. When those interests combined, as they did once Hitler decided to attack the Soviet Union in June 1941, Persia's strategic situation was of vital interest to both Allies and Axis alike.

Invasion by one or the other was inevitable—either immediately by the newly-allied Russia and Britain to secure a vital supply route from the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea, or eventually by the Germans across the Caucasus to menace the Soviet rear and place the Axis astride British routes to India, Australia, and the Far East. In addition, whichever belligerent gained control of the Persian oil-wells and those of neighbouring Iraq would ensure for itself the world's biggest supply of fuel power outside the USA.

Allied proposals for 'peaceful penetration' of Persian key-points were naturally rejected by the Shah, for such 'benevolent neutrality' towards the Allies would invite Axis wrath at a time when Germany seemed to be winning on all fronts—and also because Reza Shah's own rise to power had been sparked off by revulsion against former military occupation of Persia by Russia and Britain. In 1921, General Reza Khan (who had fought his way up from obscurity in the ranks of the Persian Cossacks to become C-in-C of the armed forces) decided to put an end to foreign exploitation, marched on the capital, overthrew the vacillating Persian government of the day



Before the Allied invasion: Reza Shah, the ruler of Persia (left), at a parade in Teheran. Behind him stands his son and eventual successor—the Crown Prince Mohammed Reza Pahlavi



The Anglo/Soviet invasion of Persia had been precipitated by Germany's invasion of Russia but the British had their plans already prepared, for the fear of Axis infiltration into Persia had always been present in the minds of the British strategists. Reza Shah had tried to steer his country between Axis and Allied domination—a policy which neither of the two could afford to endorse—and the Allies got their blow in first

and, having become War Minister and Prime Minister in turn, began to transform Persia into a well-ordered and independently governed state.

Hailed as the saviour of his country, he was elected to ascend the Peacock Throne as Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1925 after a Constituent Assembly had deposed the last effete Qajar Padishah for refusing to return to Persia from an over-prolonged sojourn in France. He then pushed through a programme of reform and modernisation hitherto unparalleled in Middle Eastern history—all achieved without the aid of foreign loans. But in accepting German technical advisers, Reza Shah had unwittingly enabled Nazi agents to infiltrate among the technicians occupying positions of influence within the railway, post, and telegraph departments—while the German re-equipment of Persia's armed forces provided further opportunities for subversion by Nazi sympathisers.

Fearing Russia, distrusting Britain, and now uneasy about German intentions, Reza Shah was faced with an impossible choice. And though Allied demands during August 1941 for the expulsion of all German nationals were as unreasonable as they were illegal, Reza Shah's attempt to temporise provided an official 'justification' for invasion. Accused by the Allies of being pro-German, attacked by German propaganda as being subservient to the Allies, the old Persian patriot went on trying to avoid putting the clock back to the bad old days by insisting on his country's neutrality—but finally decided that, if an Allied invasion was inevitable, he would order a mere token resistance in order to save his country from unnecessary bloodshed and to avoid German accusations of, and future reprisals for, Persian collaboration with the Allies.

Russia invades from the north

The Anglo-Soviet advance into Persia had been planned for August 22, 1941, but was postponed until the night of the 24th/25th because Russian plans were not completed in time. At zero hour, one of General Novikov's mechanised columns

moved down through the province of Azerbaijan to occupy Maku and Khvoi and other points around Lake Urmia not far from the Perso-Turkish frontier and, leaving detachments to patrol northern Kurdistan, moved on to Ardebil and Tabriz, the 'second city' of Persia. Advancing along the shore of the Caspian, 200 miles to the east, Novikov's second column occupied the important port of Bandari Pahlavi, sweeping on through the Gilan and Mazandaran provinces down to Qazvin, 100 miles from Teheran, where both columns were to converge and eventually link up with their British allies advancing from the south. Some 300 miles farther eastwards, the Russians occupied Bandar Shah, Caspian terminus of the Trans-Iranian Railway, advancing through the provinces of Gorgan and northern Khorasan to occupy the important railway junctions of Semnan and Shahrud en route to the capital.

On August 25 Soviet aircraft bombed Tabriz, Rasht, and Qazvin, causing great loss of civilian life. The suburbs of Teheran were bombed on the 26th, while the centre of the capital itself was subjected to leaflet raids urging the deposition of the Shah.

Partly because Persian forces were not fully deployed (on orders from the Shah), partly because it was generally known that the Persian government intended to capitulate, the Soviet advance was rapid and smooth—but possibly more because of the terror the Russian advance spread in its wake. The Persian army was well aware of, and naturally had no great wish to share, the unhappy fate of Polish officers and those of the Baltic states after Soviet forces had occupied those territories. Having done their duty, those Persian troops who could get away abandoned their arms and made their way home as best they could; those who were captured by the Russians were imprisoned and harshly treated for three months (in violation of the armistice terms). Meanwhile, marauding tribesmen had seized or had been sold (some reports claim the Russians themselves distributed) quantities of

arms—and insurrection flared as they moved down to pillage long-settled communities in southern Kurdistan and the Kermanshah region to the rear of the British advance.

Churchill's first instruction regarding the invasion was that 'Iran' (the country's official name at that time) was too confusingly similar to that of neighbouring Iraq: to avoid misunderstanding, Allied communications would revert to use of the ancient name of Persia. For the same reason, the Persian town of Araq was renamed Sultanabad.

On July 22, 1941, General Wavell, Commander-in-Chief India and responsible for Iraq and Persia, instructed Lieutenant-General E. P. Quinan to prepare 'Iraq Force' for a military occupation of the oil refinery at Abadan and the oilfields at Ahwaz—both in the Persian Gulf region—and also those at Kermanshah, 300 miles to the north. In addition, Bandar Shahr, southern terminus of the Trans-Iranian Railway was to be occupied and then all communications throughout the country were to be secured in co-operation with Soviet forces.

As yet unaware of the Shah's intention to offer only token resistance, the slender and already overtaxed resources at Quinan's disposal and the vast area to be covered infused the proposed British venture with the spirit of a fantastic gamble. The 13th Lancers were brought back from Syria to join the 8th Indian Division at Shaibah, together with the 24th Indian Infantry Brigade from Tel Zouane and No. 1 Squadron of the Guides Cavalry from Khanakin. The 9th Armoured Brigade (components of which had formed part of 'Kingcol's' dash from Palestine to Habbaniyah and Baghdad, thence to Palmyra and the Syrian campaign) crossed the desert once more to join Iraq Force at Khanakin, together with the 21st Indian Infantry Brigade from Syria. The 5th Indian Division was loaned from Middle East Command with the 6th Division standing by, ready to follow if needed.

The British advance was to be two-pronged—Major-General G. O. Harvey, commanding 8th Indian Division, would take control of the invasion of southern Persia from Basra, operating from across the Shatt al' Arab, while Major-General W. J. Slim (who had been recalled from Syria on August 24) would take over Brigadier J. A. Aizlewood's plan for the move on Kermanshah across the formidable Pa-i-Tak Pass—a much deeper penetration into Persia from the north-eastern Iraqi oil town of Khanakin, only 25 miles from the Persian oil-well of Naft-i-Shah in the Luristan foothills, which British troops could occupy in a diversion from their advance along the main Baghdad-Teheran road.

At 2100 hours on August 24, 1941, the 2nd/6th Rajputana Rifles and 1st Kumaon Rifles of Brigadier R. E. Le Fleming's 24th Indian Infantry Brigade embarked at Maqil (Basra) in small motor boats and paddle boats and began to drift silently down the 50 miles of the Shatt al' Arab which would bring them to the island oil refinery of Abadan. Dawn approach plans were upset as overloaded boats stuck on sandbanks and also by the unexpected (though lawful) presence of two foreign merchantmen at the very quay chosen for the Rajputana assault landing, so that, in the confusion, the second wave landed before the first—and under a hail of fire from Persian sentries along the quays and on the refinery rooftops. Then invaders and defenders alike found themselves mixed up with civilian fire-fighters who had been called out by the refinery sirens when the guns of HMS *Shoreham* began to reduce a Persian sloop to a blazing wreck.

The Kumaonis made a less eventful approach upon the refinery area by way of the European living quarters, but the brave and sturdy Persian troops resisted from dawn to dusk and delayed a link-up between the Kumaonis and Rajputanas until 2000 hours, when Abadan came safely into British hands. During this incendiary day, with the refinery likely to be blown sky-high at any moment, British and Persian civilian oilmen went about their tasks as though nothing unusual was happening around them!

At 0400 hours on this same day, on the other side of the River Karun, which separated Abadan from the Persian mainland, the naval barracks at

Khorramshahr were attacked by a company of the Baluchi Regiment, who stormed ashore from HMS *Falmouth* and HMAS *Yarra*, whose guns blasted Persian gunboats out of existence with great loss of life. At the same time, a land assault was made on the town and fort of Khorramshahr by the 1st/2nd and 2nd/3rd Gurkha Rifles of the 18th Indian Infantry Brigade (Brigadier R. G. Lochner) and the 5/5th Mahratta Light Infantry of the 24th Brigade, who, with a battery of field artillery and a squadron of the 13th Lancers attached, had been ferried across from Maqil during the night and had raced across the desert (dealing with tribal firing on their way) in a big loop which brought them into Khorramshahr from the north. British field guns and infantry mortars shelled the fort and wireless station and, after fierce fighting, the town and naval headquarters of Khorramshahr came under British military occupation.

A modern case of 'piracy'

Meanwhile, in the early hours of August 25, the armed Australian merchant cruiser *Kanimbla*, with Major W. E. Maxwell and two companies of the 3/10th Baluch Regiment aboard for the past fortnight, steamed in from the Persian Gulf and, preceded by a number of tugs, native dhows, and Royal Navy river craft, suddenly rounded a headland and bore down upon three Italian and five German merchantmen sheltering at Bandar Shahpur, southern terminus of the Trans-Iranian Railway, some 50 miles from Khorramshahr. The German ship *Hohenfels* sounded her alarm too late to prevent Australian seamen and the Baluchis seizing all the Axis ships, together with two Persian gunboats, in a speedy boarding operation. Only one Axis ship was lost, set on fire by her own crew. At 0715 hours the first company of Baluchis made a shore landing and carried out their duties so effectively that, by the time the second wave followed at 0830 hours, Bandar Shahpur was under British control—and so were 300 identically clad Germans, claiming to be tourists...

While these modern examples of 'piracy on the high seas' were going on at Bandar Shahpur, Khorramshahr, and Abadan, an airborne company of Baluchis had been flown from Shaibah in six RAF Vickers some 100 miles inland where (to the obvious relief of the Persian domestic servants mounting guard over their British and Indian employers), they occupied the oilfields at Haft Khel and Masjid-i-Suleiman. At 0330 hours on August 25, Brigadier R. G. Mountain's 25th Indian Infantry Brigade dispatched the 1/5th Mahratta Light Infantry and the 2nd Royal/11th Sikh Regiment, with a squadron of 13th Lancers under command, to round up Persian troops in the vicinity of Qasr Shaikh, a useful bridgehead north of Khorramshahr. After a frontal attack by the Sikhs and an engagement between the 13th Lancers and Persian armoured cars, it was captured at about noon.

At Ahwaz, the 'southern capital', Persian resistance was expected to be stiff. A squadron of RAF Blenheims bombed the city on August 26, putting several Persian aircraft out of action, while Royal Navy river boats transported 800 troops and heavy equipment some 25 miles up the shallow River Karun on the 26th and 27th. In the early light of August 28, both the 18th and 25th Brigades (one each side of the river) raced the remaining 25 miles towards the entrenched Persian positions at Ahwaz and were about to encircle the town when the Shah's order for a 'cease fire' arrived. Persian troops piled into lorries, their officers into taxis; Indian troops bathed in the river; the British made tea.

While the series of lightning thrusts brought southern Persia under British control, an even deeper penetration into the Shah's territory was beginning some 300 miles to the north-east, advancing from the Iraqi oil town of Khanaqin near the Persian frontier. Brigadier J. A. Aizlewood, commanding the 2nd Indian Armoured Brigade, planned this phase of the advance, his force depleted at the outset by the loan of the 13th Lancers and a squadron of the 10th Guides Cavalry to Major-General Harvey in the south. But his obsolescent tanks, carriers, and trucks

of the 14/20th Hussars, a field regiment and a medium battery of artillery, were reinforced by lorried infantry of the 1/5th Gurkha Rifles (from the 17th Brigade) and 2/7th Gurkha Rifles (from 20th Brigade). Also, loaned from the Middle East, there were the Warwickshire Yeomanry and other formations of the 9th Armoured Brigade.

Recalled from Syria on August 24 to take overall command of the operation was General Slim (who approved Brigadier Aizlewood's plans as they stood) and Brigadier C. J. Weld's 21st Indian Infantry Brigade, consisting of only two battalions but with a field regiment of artillery added.

Awakened from sleep at 0500 hours on August 25, the Persian gendarmerie and customs police at Khosrovi found their frontier post in the hands of the 1/5th Gurkha Rifles; Qasr-i-Shirin had already been surrounded by the 14/20th Hussars in their Mk VII tanks, a single Vickers machine-gun apiece, while the 4/13th Frontier Force Rifles and the 2/4th Gurkha Rifles occupied the village. The column moved on at 0830 hours to enter Sar-i-Pul Zahab without incident at 1930.

Meanwhile, in the early morning light of August 25, the 2/7th Gurkha Rifles had dashed across country and secured the oilfield at Naft-i-Shah with little opposition; the Warwickshire Yeomanry had also reached a point beyond the Pa-i-Tak Pass 25 miles south of Sar-i-Pul Zahab, striking the main road and entering Gilan at 1200 hours. Further advance was then checked by Persian machine-gun, anti-tank, and artillery fire coming from a ridge which commanded a south-westerly aspect of the village. Bombardment continued until nightfall—but RAF reconnaissance next morning revealed that the Persians had withdrawn under cover of darkness and the advance was able to continue at noon.

While the advance column moved on towards Shahabad, the 21st Indian Infantry Brigade were tackling the formidable Pa-i-Tak Pass. In the troubled times before Shah Reza's reign, a handful of crack-shot tribesmen had held up an entire army division for days among the hairpin bends and precipitous cliffs—but Slim and Aizlewood had even stronger opposition to contend with in the well-equipped Persian mountain troops who held the pass in strength and whose resistance was expected to be stubborn. However, before the Gurkhas were ordered up the cliff face, RAF reconnaissance aircraft located Persian strong-points and, during the afternoon and early evening of August 26, RAF Blenheims screamed across the rock face in flights of 30 and precision-bombed them. Next day it was discovered that the Persians, no doubt alarmed that their escape route was in danger, had withdrawn during the night, leaving the pass undefended.

The Shah orders cease-fire

Met by patrols of the 9th Armoured Brigade at Karind, the 21st Brigade moved on to Shahabad and, linking up with the rest of Slim's troops, the combined column advanced 13 miles eastward to Zabiri where the Warwickshire Yeomanry ran into a Persian ambush and where the Persians kept the road under shellfire until nightfall—the British 18-pounders outdistanced by the more up-to-date 155-mm of the Persian heavy artillery.

Kermanshah was almost within sight, the road lying straight ahead across the valley and into the hills beyond. Also ahead, two Persian divisions and a cavalry brigade were known to be facing Slim's composite force. But although an attack was planned for 1000 hours next day, the test of strength never came: at 0830 hours on August 28, General Muqadam, commander of the Persian forces in the region, received the Shah's order to end resistance and so arranged a 'cease fire'. For miles as they drove into Kermanshah, Slim and the Persian emissary passed column after column of Persian troops already preparing to make for their homes. The oil refinery was occupied on August 29 and a victory march through Kermanshah was staged on August 30.

No time was wasted at Kermanshah after the victory march, for Qazvin—the agreed Allied meeting place—was a mountain range and over 200 miles away—and Soviet troops were already reported to be penetrating beyond their allotted

occupation area. On August 30, Brigadier Aizlewood's force crossed the 7,000-foot-high Shah Pass and moved on to Hamadan, an important trading centre. A small force of 1/5th Gurkha Rifles and the 15th Field Regiment in armoured cars and light trucks rushed a further 100 miles north-west to Sinneh. Colonel J. O. Pocock, commanding this flying column, raced ahead in his staff car to reach Sinneh at midnight on August 31, his arrival coinciding with the return of the Soviet commander with three armoured cars and four lorries of troops, who had been distributing pictures of Stalin and Soviet propaganda material throughout the district since 1400 hours that day. Civilities were exchanged, after which the Russian column withdrew to Soviet headquarters at Qazvin, 125 miles away. Later on that morning of September 1, the British column paraded its guns through Sinneh to 'show the flag'.

Meanwhile Slim had advanced his headquarters to Sultanabad (Araq)—another important railway town, 130 miles from Teheran—ready to march on the capital should the reported differences between Reza Shah and the Allied diplomats (Mr Smirnov, Soviet ambassador, and Sir Reader Bullard, British minister) fail to be amicably resolved. Top-level discussions had been going on since the Allied invasion became fact on the morning of August 25, and though the Shah had brought the token resistance of his troops to an end on August 28, martial law had to be declared in Teheran on August 30 because high-ranking officers of the Persian army and air force threatened mutiny if hostilities were not resumed immediately.

The Shah had also appointed a new Prime Minister more acceptable to the Allies, but had arrested General Ahmad Nakhchevan, the new War Minister, for allowing Persian troops to disperse after the 'cease fire', abandoning their arms to rebel tribesmen and Communist agitators whom the Shah had spent his entire reign in trying to keep under control. Meanwhile, he continued to temporise about the expulsion of Axis nationals from his country.

The Shah's son takes over

The situation threatened to worsen; Wavell flew from India to Teheran for discussions with the Soviet Commander-in-Chief and Allied diplomats; an Allied ultimatum of September 10 demanding the departure of Axis nationals within 48 hours was obviously impossible to fulfil and the Allies decided to occupy the capital. Disagreements between Reza Shah and dissident members of parliament (among whom was Dr Mossadeq, notoriously anti-British, but anti-Shah at the same time) led to the Shah's abdication in favour of his son, Crown Prince Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who had received part of his education in Europe.

Soviet and British troops entered the capital on September 17—Brigadier Aizlewood and the mechanised contingent of the Household Cavalry being met by Major-General W. A. K. Fraser, who, since commanding the Basra phase of British action against Raschid Ali, had been appointed British Military Attaché in Teheran. Slim also came to the capital for military talks with his Soviet opposite number, to arrange for the 21st Indian and 9th Armoured Brigades to police British lines of communication across Persia (now endangered by Kurdish and Luri tribesmen), and to prepare defensive positions in north-west Persia against possible German invasion through the Caucasus or Anatolia. Thus the great figures and military units who had been transferred at short notice from Palestine, Egypt, and India to meet the crises in Iraq and Syria, now met at the final curtain of the three-act drama which ended in complete occupation of Persia.

Swift Allied action, however morally ambiguous, had not only thwarted German subversion in the three countries but had saved Middle Eastern oil and vital supply routes for the Allied cause. Along the Persian supply route alone, from the Gulf to the Caspian, Britain and the USA sent an estimated total of 5,000,000 tons of arms, aircraft, and ammunition to Russia.

[For H. S. Northcote's biography, see p. 521.]