

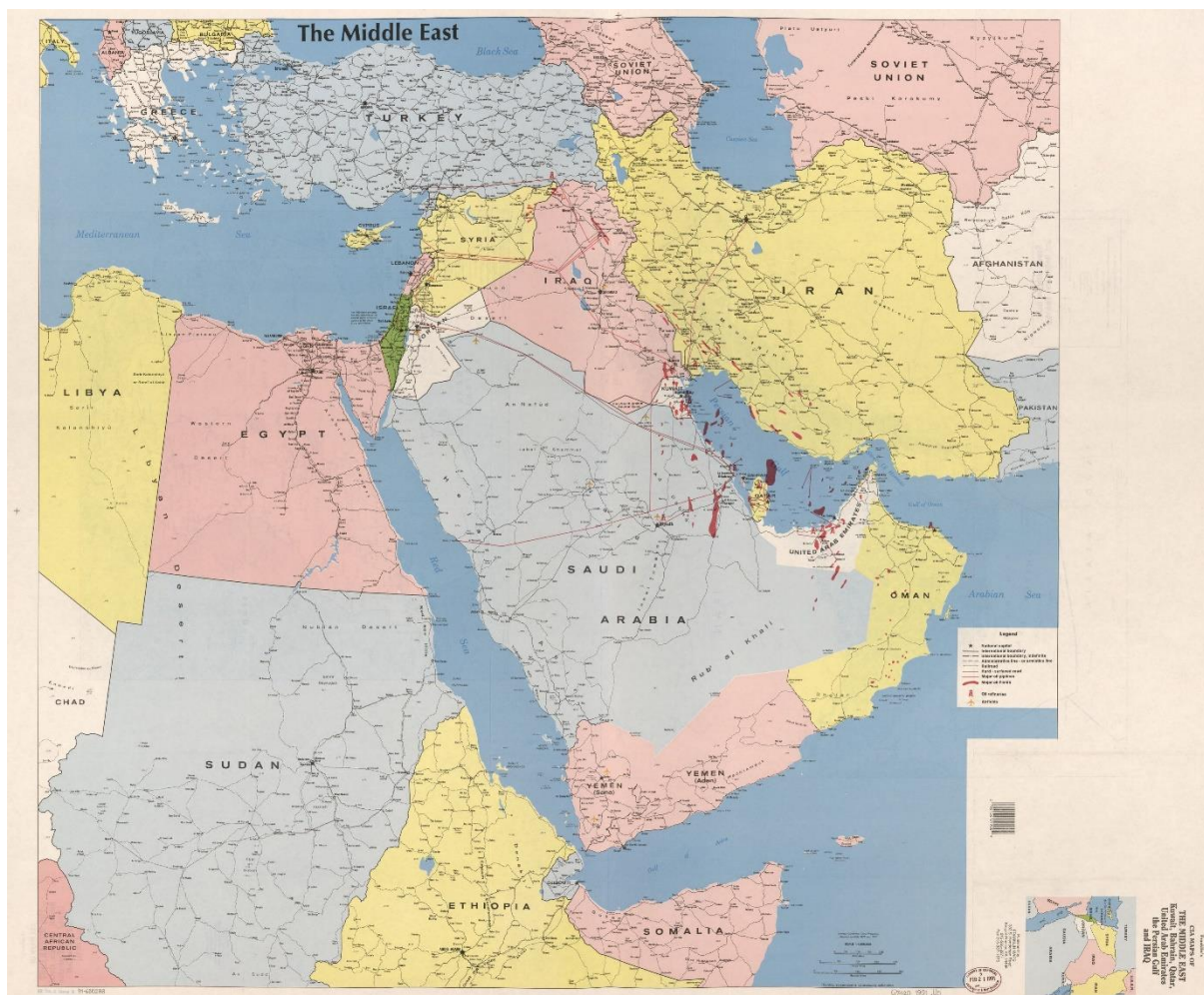
The Middle Eastern Campaign May-September 1941

and

The Persian Corridor 1941-45

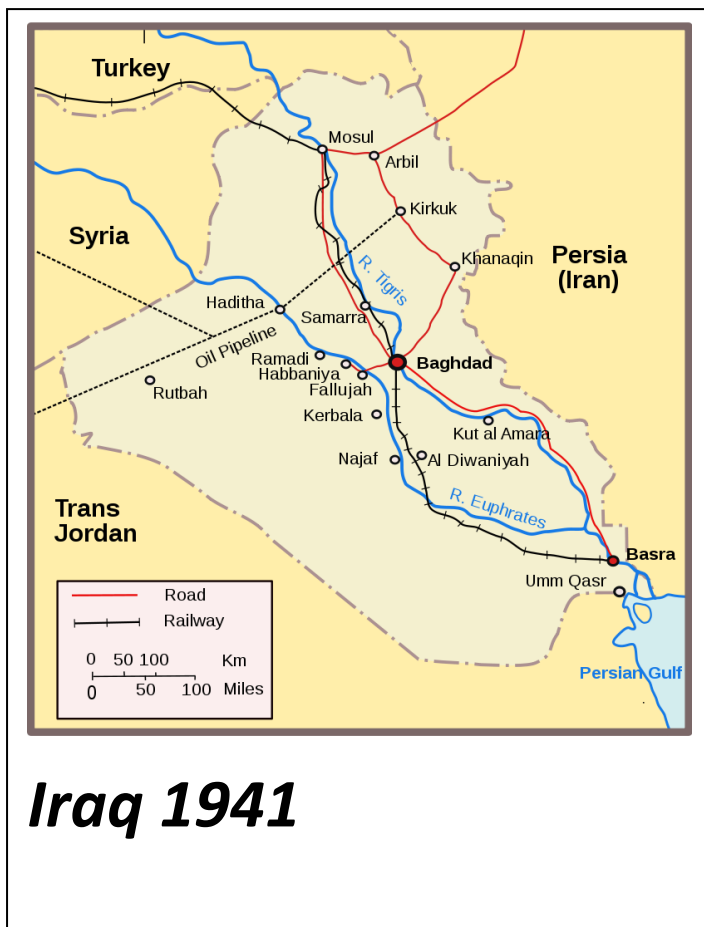
And why this was the most important campaign of the Second World War.

When the British and Commonwealth armies crossed the border into Iraq during early May 1941 it was nothing more than a sideshow, a random assortment of troops pieced together from different fronts. The aim was simply to deny the Germans and Italians of a possible ally, and to relieve a besieged garrison north of Baghdad. However, by the end of major fighting in the Middle East with the abdication of the Reza Shah (the Iranian leader) on the 16th of September 1941, the Middle East had become of vital strategic importance to the Allied war effort, not for the Mediterranean or North African theatres, but for the war on the Eastern Front. The Corridor of supplies opened to the Soviet Union was, arguably, the most important thing the Western Allies ever did.



The Iraqi Campaign—May 2nd 1941 to May 31st 1941

Iraq had only been independent from Britain for 7 years when war broke out, and immediately seemed to lean heavily towards the Allies, breaking off diplomatic relations with Germany, although not declaring war. However, in March 1940, the Anti-British Rashid Ali became Prime Minister of Iraq. He began to change the country's stance, although he still did not openly support the Axis. The giveaway sign came in June 1940, when Italy joined the war against the Allies. This time Iraq did not break off relations, and the Italians could act as a connection between Iraq and Germany.



However, when Rashid Ali was replaced in January 1941, it seemed possible that everything might go back to normal. Not for long. A coup on the first of April saw Ali back in power, and this time he didn't hesitate to go openly pro-Axis. Seventeen days after taking power, he asked Germany to give military assistance in the case of war with Britain. Having heavily underestimated Britain and its allies' military power, Ali thought that Britain would negotiate, not invade. He was wrong.

Over the next month, both the British and Iraqis began to build up forces in Iraq, as the British still had military bases there. The bases were the main areas of tension, particularly RAF Habbaniya, an airbase around 50 miles northwest of Baghdad. In an attempt to stop a British build-up in Iraq, Ali ordered that all British forces going through Iraq must be transported quickly, and not stay in the country,

but the British simply ignored this and reinforced the garrisons anyway.

On the 18th April, the 20th Indian Infantry Brigade landed at Basra, a port in Southern Iraq, unopposed. More soldiers landed over the remainder of April; the British preferred to build up around Basra than to invade all of Iraq, as they had little force for a full-scale attack. However, Ali did not like the build-up at Basra. When he asked them to leave and they didn't, Ali decided that he would take action: he would besiege the base at Habbaniya, north of Baghdad, until they left. Naturally, this was unlikely to work, and, indeed, it didn't.

During the morning of the 1st of May, Iraqi troops began to surround Habbaniya, but did not attack. By the 2nd, it was clear that war would break out, and it was just a question of who would fire the first shot. The aircraft at Habbaniya began to launch airstrikes that would last four days, and the

Iraqis returned with artillery barrages. On the 6th May, the Iraqi troops retreated from the base. On the same day, the orders were given for a Luftwaffe group to be sent to Iraq. These planes arrived between the 10th and 15th May. On the 13th, the Vichy French (based in next-door Syria) sent the first of many trainloads of supplies to the Iraqis, along with allowing the Germans to use their airfields to move planes to Iraq. Even the Italians chipped in, sending aircraft on the 27th May.

By the 17th May, a relief force from Palestine (codenamed Habforce) had reached Habbaniya, and pushed on to an important bridge in the town of Fallujah. After a fierce defence of the town, and a failed counterattack (with the rather half-hearted help of the Luftwaffe), by the 23rd the Iraqis had lost Fallujah, and the path was open to Baghdad, while at the same time around Basra the British were beginning to expand.

Although hindered by many blown up bridges, by the 29th the British army was at the gates of Baghdad, and most of the government had fled, first to Persia, and on to Germany. On the 31st, an armistice was signed, ending the war in Iraq.

The Syrian Campaign—June 8th 1941 to July 14th 1941

During the campaign in Iraq, Germany and Italy had sent a number of aircraft into the country. What was strange about this was the distance—the nearest Axis airbase was on Rhodes, 1,400 kilometres from the planes' landing point in Mosul. Over half the aircraft sent couldn't fly over 1,000 kilometres, so an issue appeared. Where were they flying from?

Bordering Iraq, and definitely in range, with airbases, was Vichy French Syria. This had confirmed British fears: Vichy France, despite its official 'armed neutrality', was allowing the Germans to use its bases, and had also sent in weapons and supplies to the Iraqis. Britain had been allowing airstrikes against Syria since they found German planes there in mid-May, but they had been aimed at German aircraft. There had been dogfights between Vichy French and British planes over Syria already however, so tensions were already high, with some casualties on both sides. Therefore, the British had already decided by halfway through the campaign in Iraq that they would have to invade Syria too. This was added to with worries that Germany could use Syria as a base to bomb Egypt from, as it was by a considerable margin the closest base. The British had been very worried about an invasion of Egypt ever since the invasion of Greece, but this attack never materialized.

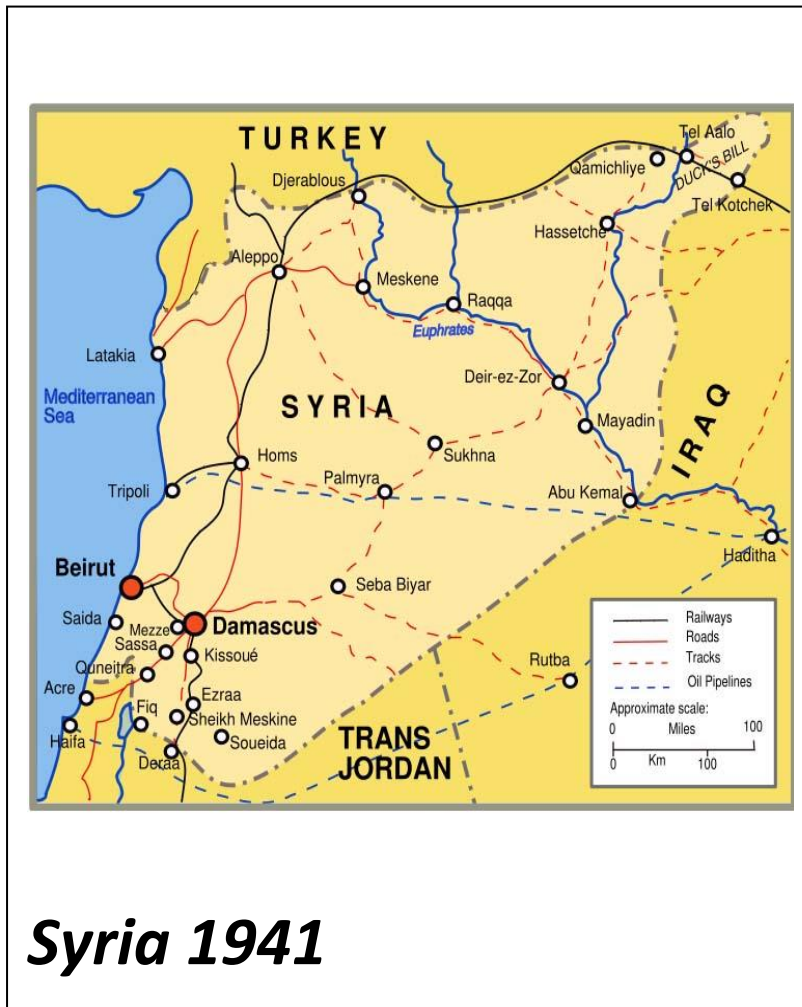
By 8th June 1941, the British had readied a force for the invasion of Syria. They planned to attack in four main places: two from the south, for Lebanon and Damascus, and two from the north, one to Palmyra, in the middle of Syria, which would then push towards the coast at Tripoli (not the city in Libya – a town on the Lebanese coast) to secure the oil pipeline that cut across Syria. This was to be done by Habforce, the same group that had relieved RAF Habbaniya a month earlier. The other northern attack was more significant. To the north of Habforce, the 10th Indian Division would attack up the Euphrates, which flows through Syria from Northwest to Southeast (see map below). Then they would move to Aleppo, and cut off the railway to Turkey, which the British thought might be pro-Axis too, to avoid either Vichy forces escaping, or supplies arriving.

The Southern prongs were rather more complicated: there weren't really two attacks, but more like three or four, one heading for Damascus (the 1st Free French Division), the Lebanon force, the 7th Australian division, which was split up, one part heading for Beirut (the Australian 21st Brigade, with the help of Commandos landing halfway up the coast between Haifa and Beirut), and one part

heading for Rayak Airfield (The Australian 25th Brigade (It's not on the map, but Rayak is a little inland from Beirut).

Then there was the one in the middle, the 5th Indian Brigade group, taking Quneitra and Deraa, and moving slowly up towards Damascus.

The actual attack happened as planned, but with strong Vichy resistance around the area towards Beirut, with almost constant battles until 15th June. On the Iraqi border, at first there was little or no resistance, but there began to be once Habforce reached Palmyra (1st July), and the 10th Indian Division reached Deir-ez-Zor (3rd July). The advance on Damascus was slow but continuous, with the 5th Indian Brigade Group clearing the way for the Free French to take Damascus at the Battle of Kissoué between 15th and 17th June. The Battle of Damascus itself must have felt very like a civil war, with Frenchmen



fighting Frenchmen across the city. By the end of the campaign, over five and a half thousand Vichy soldiers had defected to the Free French. Damascus fell to the allies on the 21st June 1941. For a few days at the end of June the front stalled, but by early July it was moving again. Beirut fell on the 12th July, effectively ending the Syrian campaign, and an armistice was signed on the 14th. Almost 38,000 Vichy troops returned to France, and after a brief period of Free French occupation, Syria and Lebanon (the latter became a separate country in 1943) gained independence.

The war in Syria is an excellent example of the global nature of the war, with Australians fighting Frenchmen in the Crusader castles of Syria. But the war during the campaign had become considerably more global, for the day after the capture of Damascus, possibly the most important event in all of the 20th century occurred, which would change the course of the war, and history, to a massive extent.

The Iranian Campaign—August 25th 1941 to September 16th 1941

On the 22nd June 1941 Operation Barbarossa began: the German invasion of the Soviet Union. It was the largest operation ever, with the highest casualties ever. For the rest of the war, between 80% and 60% (always the majority) of the German army were on the Eastern front. Four years later, it would be Soviet troops marching into Berlin. The operation, although at first successful, was the end

of the Axis powers. With Russia in the war, Germany had opened a front they could never close, and a front which would be their ultimate downfall. Without any US or UK ground military operations, just the threat of Western invasion, the Soviets could still have won the war. Even if 100% of the German army had been on the Eastern Front, at all times, at no point would it have been larger than the Red Army. However, it wasn't the case that the Russians could win the war alone.

Due to the invasion of their agricultural and mining heartland, Ukraine, in the early stages of Barbarossa, the USSR was short on a number of things – food and materials in particular. Also, despite the incredibly high rate of weapons production, there were also shortages in military equipment. Without these vital supplies, the Soviet war economy would grind to a halt, and the war would probably end, with Germany focusing its full might to the west. The American Lend-Lease system, luckily, was happy to provide these needs: Lend-Lease was an American plan to 'lend' goods needed for war to the other Allied powers, which they would pay back at the end of the war.

These supplies had to get from the officially neutral United States to the USSR without getting attacked by Axis forces. At first, the obvious route was across the Pacific, but tensions between Japan and the US were rising, and it would only take Japanese entry into the war to make that route completely impossible. The other way was the infamous Arctic Convoys to Murmansk and Archangel, which were incredibly dangerous. But something caught the eye of the Allied strategists: a country bordering a safe, well protected part of the British Empire, with a railway system connecting its major ports directly to Soviet cities nearby. It was nowhere near any Axis powers, and, as long as ships went round the Cape of Good Hope, had a completely safe sea route to it. This country was Iran, but there was a small problem: the Allies didn't own it, and the country's leaders wouldn't let them through it.

There were other reasons to invade as well: Iran had the highest oil production in the Middle East, and the Iranian leader, Reza Shah, was considered pro-Axis by the British, although the truth in this is arguable. It is quite possible Britain would have invaded anyway, for the oil, but Barbarossa made it an imperative.

Pressure was put on the Iranian government prior to the invasion, with Britain requesting all German citizens in Iran (somewhere around 1000 of them) to be forced out. Reza Shah did decrease trade with Germany, but did not expel the citizens. Of course, it did not really matter. In fact, after the initial attack, Reza Shah asked the ambassador whether if he did expel German citizens, the invasion would stop. The ambassador didn't bother to reply. The British and Soviets had just been looking for pretext.

The invasion plan was not complex: the Allied forces would attack over three of their four borders with Iran, over the South-Western or Iraqi border with the British, over the North-western border with the Soviets, over the North-Eastern or Turkmen border with the Soviets, but not over the incredibly arid South-Eastern or Indian (now Pakistani) border with the British (although there were landings in central Southern Iranian ports instead) The attack from Iraq would be with the group whose name showed the extents that the British Army would go to hide a force's planned objective: Paiforce (Persia and Iraq Force; I somehow feel a German spy could have worked that out fairly easily), with the main units being the 8th and 10th Indian Infantry Divisions. The North-Western attack would be with the 44th and 47th Armies of the Transcaucasus Front, which, in comparison to most Soviet Fronts, saw little action outside of a small window in the second half of 1942 where the German Army Group A reached the Caucasus and held the front for a few months as the Battle of Stalingrad raged to the north. The North-Eastern attack would be done by the Soviet 53rd Army, and the Royal and Royal Australian Navies would supply troops for the landings in the South.

A noticeable element of the Invasion of Iran is its speed. The main military part of the campaign took only 4 days, from 25th to 29st of August, and captured almost all major cities. This was helped by the fact that the majority of the population of Iran is around the country's mountainous periphery, not



Iran 1941 [1] (Not entirely accurate)



Western Iran 1941 [2]

its arid and hot centre, which is mostly taken up by salt pans. It was also helped by the number of points of invasion, but the main reason for the speed was the complete surprise that the Allies achieved on the Iranian forces. Bombing of Tehran and Kazvin (Modern name 'Qazvin', Map 2) by the RAF, and Tabriz (Map 1) and other Northern Iranian cities by the Red Army Air Force weakened the Iranian defences further, and the first troops crossed the border early on the 25th.

Naval landings around Bandar Shahpur (Maps 1 and 2), Abadan (Map 2), and Bandar Abbas (Not on either map, but in the bay between the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman in Map 1) were all successful, and soon all major oil refineries and ports in Iran were secured. The attacks from Iraq were equally successful, with the 8th Indian Division in the South capturing Khorramshahr on the 25th, and reaching Ahvaz (On both maps spelt 'Ahwaz') on the 27th, however strong Iranian resistance stopped them taking the city until the ceasefire on the 29th. To the North, the 10th Indian Division, under the command of William Slim, the soon-to-be commander of the 14th Army, the largest single formation in the world by 1945, and the largest Commonwealth army of the war, had massed at the town of Kanaqin (Map 2) and begun their attack towards Kermanshah, and captured an oilfield at Naft-I-Shah (Map 2), but were fighting on difficult, mountainous terrain, with few passes and fewer roads. The Iranians tried to defend the most important pass, Pai Tak Pass (Map 2), but overwhelming British firepower, from artillery and aircraft, saw the defending forces scatter. Despite further stalling attempts by the Iranians, mainly focused on blocking or blowing up parts of the road to Kermanshah, by the ceasefire on the 29th the 10th Indian Division had reached Karind (Map 2), and had got through the difficult mountain section of the road. On the 1st September, the Iranian defenders allowed the

British in to Kermanshah, opened Senna (Map 2, now called Sanandaj), and allowed them to join up with the Russians at Kazvin.

The Russian advance in the Northwest got the furthest into Iran by the 29th, having taken Tabriz, but were not quite as well-behaved, continuing their advance past the ceasefire on the 29th, taking Hamadan and Qom (both map 2) on the 30th, and only stopping on September 1st, leaving only Kazvin and Tehran untaken. The north-eastern attack from Turkmenistan is less exciting, with the Russian forces reaching Mashhad (Map 1, spelt Meshed) but not extending much deeper than that by the ceasefire.

With most of the country's cities under Allied occupation, Reza Shah tried to hold on to his country's independence, and tried to stall negotiations. Having had enough of this, the Soviets marched to the capital, Tehran, on the 16th September, and entered on the 17th. Reza Shah abdicated on the 16th, and was replaced with Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the last Shah of Iran.

The Persian Corridor—1941-45

With Iran now an Allied puppet, and large zones of occupation carved out for both sides, the Lend Lease could start flowing through. Ships from the Eastern US would take it round Africa, via the Cape of Good Hope to avoid the Italians, and a few ships from the Western US went via Australia. They would land in Gulf ports like Basra, and would then take the very helpful railway through Iran to, depending on the position of the front, Baku and northwards (see map 1 for these places) if the Russians were doing well; the Caspian Sea, to be shipped north, if the Russians were doing badly; or to Ashkhabad and Northwards, if all the other routes were full, because the Russians never did *that* badly.

The Persian corridor didn't provide the most Lend Lease access of the war, but it was the only route that was not easily closed off. The Arctic route had incredibly high casualties and the Pacific route could be stopped simply with Japan declaring war on the Soviet Union (which, helpfully, it only did after Germany was defeated), leaving only the Persian Corridor. Also, the largest route—the Pacific route, couldn't carry weaponry due to the state of Japanese relations with the USA, making the Persian lend lease route even more important. If all of the other routes had been closed down, this one would remain, and its existence also meant (at least between 1941-43) the existence of the Soviet Union as a working state.

Conclusion

The Middle Eastern campaign could seem, from looking at a map, a domino effect. Iraq seems to be its cornerstone, the country always used as the military platform for the British, and also the spark that set the whole area alight. But, much as it would be nice and simple to think of the campaign as a domino effect, it wasn't. Perhaps you could argue that Iraq and Syria were connected, but Iran certainly wasn't. However, it was the Iranian campaign that was the most significant, and the only one that didn't, from an outside perspective, have to be done. Britain was forced into invading Iraq by the fact it was going pro-Axis, forced into Syria by Vichy going pro-Axis. But Iran was a decision, and a well-made one. The operations in Iraq and Syria mattered in the extent that they denied Germany a foothold in the region and therefore stopped oil-starved Germany from getting hold of the substance that was the life-blood of its Panzer divisions, but nobody could argue that this was the war's primary theatre. In fact, some British generals were unhappy to see soldiers leave the main fronts for the strategic backwater of the Middle East, and at least at first, you couldn't disagree with their worries. But 22nd June 1941 changed that, and suddenly the Middle East felt like the centre of the world.

I have put a lot on of emphasis on a Lend-Lease route that was never the primary one to the USSR. The reason I believe it is so important is that it was an insurance. It meant that Lend-Lease would only stop if the Red Army had crumbled to the extent of leaving one of the most economically important regions of Russia, the Caucasus, open to German attack. If Baku had fallen, the least of the Soviet worries would be the end of Iranian Lend-Lease. But, realistically, Iran was not going to get invaded, despite British worries of an attack through Turkey. This was in comparison to other Lend-Lease routes, all of which could have been stopped with a more strategically minded Axis leadership.

Some have argued that Lend-Lease, at least to the Russians, was unimportant, but it most certainly wasn't. Many vital elements in the mass-production of military equipment that the USSR was so famous for came predominantly from Lend Lease. As did a huge amount of food, as the Soviet Union had lost nearly half its farmland in the invasion. Khrushchev said Stalin had considered it vital (take this with a pinch of salt, it's Khrushchev on Stalin, so there is a fairly high chance this isn't 100% true):

“... Stalin made and repeated several times when we were "discussing freely" among ourselves. He stated bluntly that if the United States had not helped us, we would not have won the war. If we had had to fight Nazi Germany one on one, we could not have stood up against Germany's pressure, and we would have lost the war.”

These factors made the Middle Eastern Campaign important, including Syria and Iraq, for without them, the Persian Corridor would not have been safe, and I believe that the British invasion of the three areas of Iraq, Syria, and Iran was the most important thing that we did during the Second World War.