‘Combined action’: RAF operations in Palestine during the Arab Revolt, 1936-1939

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The Arab Revolt in Palestine, 1936-39, provides an intriguing and topical, though little studied, instance of the utility of air power in counter-insurgency. Most recent counter-insurgency scholarship focuses on post-1945 approaches typified by ‘hearts and minds’, with air power in a supporting role. Inter-war air control is seen as an outdated coercive colonial method. This paper contends the RAF in Palestine implemented a sophisticated concept of air-land integration that enabled on-call close air support, and resulted in air power playing a critical role in the suppression of the Revolt. Air power inflicted most insurgent casualties, enabled British freedom of manoeuvre, and used minimum force. This air-land integration concept was not adopted by British forces preparing for a continental war because the RAF did not believe close air support would be an effective use of air power.

Introduction

The RAF’s counter-insurgency operations during the Arab Revolt in Palestine from 1936 to 1939 provide an intriguing and topical, though little studied, instance of the utility of air power in counter-insurgency, in what was the British Empire’s most threatening insurgency since the 1919-1921 Anglo-Irish War. Intriguing because the RAF’s operations during the Revolt contradicts the conventional wisdom that insurgencies are won and lost on the ground, that air power is counterproductive in counter-insurgency because it is disproportionate and indiscriminate, and that the RAF ignored close air support between the wars.

No single study focuses on RAF operations in Palestine during the Arab revolt. Instead the topic falls between divergent studies of imperial, counter-insurgency, air power and Middle Eastern histories. Inter-war air force historiography is dominated by strategic bombing doctrine. In the only full-length examination of air power and colonial control the study of Palestine ends in 1936.
with Army control. Other studies have focused on air control in Iraq, highlighting the value of air control to RAF training, and its reliance on ground forces support. Recent interpretations of counter-insurgency remain variations of the principles that enabled British success in post-war Malaya: the government must have a clear political aim, function within the law, have an overall plan, give priority to defeating the political subversion not the guerrillas; and in the guerrilla phase of an insurgency, it must secure its base first. Pre-1945 campaigns are thought less relevant to modern practice as the classic principles of counter-insurgency, though evident, were yet to be combined effectively and the insurgents were less potent, lacking the communist revolutionary combination of guerrilla tactics, propaganda and ideology. In these predominately land-based operations air power is limited to a necessary but unsung role. Hence Petraeus’s seminal Counterinsurgency Field Manual relegates air power to a five-page annex. Yet it is air power that allows the Allies to remain in Afghanistan with far less troops than the doctrine requires.

5 Andrew Mumford, 'Unnecessary or unsung? The utilisation of airpower in Britain's colonial counterinsurgencies', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 20: 3, (2009), 636-655.
The use of air power in counter-insurgency is a topical concern: the Allied commander in Afghanistan recently reiterating ‘the necessity to avoid winning tactical victories while suffering strategic defeats’ through the indiscriminate or disproportionate use of air power.\(^6\) Broader histories of counter-insurgency have viewed air control as both a successful application of minimum force,\(^7\) and conversely as a brutal exception to its post-Amritsar interpretation.\(^8\) Callwell’s model of ‘small wars’ (military campaigns aimed at defeating the insurgents in battle) by the inter-war period represents one end of Gwynn’s spectrum of counter-insurgency and military assistance to the restoration of civil order the other.\(^9\) Air control is seen as more Callwell than Gwynn and the handover from RAF to Army control in Palestine in 1936 as a high water mark of air control.\(^10\)

The historiography of air-land integration is that ‘between 1918 and 1939 the RAF forgot how to support the Army’.\(^11\) The RAF’s advocacy of its new principles – offensive initiative, air superiority, concentration of force and centralized command and control – combined with parsimonious defence budgets strained

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\(^6\) COMISAF Initial Assessment (Unclassified), Washington Post, 21 September 2009.

\(^7\) Thomas Mockaitis, British Counterinsurgency, 1919-60 (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990).

\(^8\) Charles Townshend, Britain's Civil Wars (London: Faber, 1986).


relations, though the RAF had close air support doctrine and advocates.\(^{12}\) Palestine is hardly mentioned, though it is contended that colonial experience influenced the British in the Western Desert in 1940.\(^{13}\)

After considering the context, this paper critically examines the first phase of the Revolt when the RAF, while part of the conciliatory response adopted, and developed a sophisticated air-land integration concept. The paper then studies the RAF’s part in the suppression of the second phase of the Revolt, which became a more fragmented, rural based and externally controlled insurgency, and concludes by briefly examining the impact the campaign had on contemporary air land operations.

**The Mandate, imperial defence and imperial policing**

Every insurgency is contextual and presents its own set of challenges.\(^{14}\) Suffice to say, the RAF’s 1930 General Defence Scheme reflected Palestine’s strategic importance in protecting both the route to India and the Iraqi oil pipeline, and ‘the difficulties inherent in the Mandate:

> The Arabs consider, firstly, that promises of independence made to them by Great Britain during the War have not been kept; secondly, that their representation in the Government is less now that it was under Turkish rule; thirdly, that they in Palestine are not being allowed to develop constitutionally at the same rate as in neighbouring

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\(^{14}\) Nagl and others, *Counterinsurgency*, Foreword.
Countries, and lastly that the Balfour Declaration conflicts with the principle of the Mandate.\textsuperscript{15}

The British Mandate for Palestine differed fundamentally from others in the Middle East by introducing an unwanted settler community. Neither Jews nor Arabs wanted to share power, and so the British ruled directly. This led to two decades of repeated cycles of Arab violence, followed by British inquiries and attempts at reconciliation, and Zionist intransigence.\textsuperscript{16}

\textit{Imperial defence and air control}

In 1919 the British government faced imperial overstretch. Chief of Air Staff, Sir Hugh Trenchard, proposed the RAF could conduct imperial policing economically and expeditiously.\textsuperscript{17} The RAF later defined this concept as air control:

The political administration of undeveloped countries inhabited by backward and semi-civilized populations, rests, in the last resort upon military force in one form or another. The term 'air control' implies that control is applied by aircraft as the primary arm, usually supplemented by forces on the ground, which may be armoured vehicles, regular or irregular troops, armed police or tribal forces - according to particular requirements.\textsuperscript{18}

Air power would overcome the challenges of small wars. Where ground ‘detachments which are an essential feature of military occupation are a source of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item AIR 5/1249, Palestine and Transjordan Air Headquarters. General Defence Scheme 1930.
\item RAF Museum, Trenchard Papers: MFC 76/1/35. Memo by CAS on Air Power and Imperial Defence, 14 August 1919.
\item AIR 5/170, Air Staff Memorandum, No 46. Notes of Air Control of Undeveloped Countries (Provisional), 1930, p 3.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
weakness’, air control allowed ‘control without occupation’, ‘reduces logistics and allows better living conditions’, and ‘does not involve obtrusive presence - yet retains the threat of force’.\(^{19}\)

Churchill as Secretary of State for both War and Air, championed the idea.\(^ {20}\) As Colonial Secretary in 1921, his Cairo Conference consolidated British rule in the Middle East, ensured the implementation of the Balfour Declaration, and reduced the size of British garrisons through air substitution.\(^ {21}\) In December 1920 there were 29,000 British and Indian troops stationed in Palestine\(^ {22}\) fit ‘to face a German army under modern conditions’.\(^ {23}\) Air control ensured the survival of the fledgling RAF against Navy and Army wishes. The War Office thought it counter to the doctrine of minimum force, as reinforced by the Hunter inquiry into the Amritsar Massacre. It complained ‘if the Arab population realize that the peaceful control of Mesopotamia ultimately depended on our intention of bombing women and children, I am very doubtful if we shall gain their acquiescence’. The Air Staff defended air control, also citing minimum force: ‘loss of life [overall] is very much less than in operations on the ground’ as ‘air bombing can be carried out with a high degree of accuracy’.

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\(^{19}\) AIR 5/170, p. 4.
\(^ {21}\) CAB 23/126, CP 3123 Cabinet Report of the Cairo Conference.
\(^ {23}\) CAB 24/126, Policy and Finance in Mesopotamia, SoS Colonies dated 4 August 1921.


Policing Palestine

From 1921 until 1925 there was continual discussion and disagreement between the High Commissioner, the Colonial Office and the Air Ministry over organization of police and military forces in Palestine and Transjordan.\(^{24}\) In 1922 Churchill transferred military control to the RAF:

> I have not the necessary machinery here [the Colonial Office] for the exercise of direct military control, […]. I have accordingly invited the Air Ministry and they have accepted my invitation to act as my agents there, in the same way as they do for Iraq. This does not imply that Palestine is to be controlled from the Air, but merely that it is a matter of the administrative channel.\(^{25}\)

The Air Staff realized aircraft alone could not provide ‘public security in a more or less civilized country like Palestine where the principle sources of trouble are centred in towns’.\(^{26}\) However its only ground forces in Palestine were initially half a company of armoured cars. Churchill formed a British Gendarmerie under civil control from ex-Black and Tan or RIC Auxiliary toughs, which suppressed a riot in Nablus with rifle butts in 1922, though at ten shillings a day for each constable it was expensive, and its value quickly forgotten, as Palestine was ‘the most peaceful country in the Middle East’.\(^{27}\) Meanwhile the Air Staff were convinced of the value of the twelve aircraft in Palestine ‘the whole point was not that they did anything but that nothing happened while they were there’.\(^{28}\) A new High Commissioner, Field Marshal Lord Plumer, introduced a new defence scheme, reflecting Air Ministry

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\(^{24}\) Rudd, p. 165.
\(^{25}\) AIR 8/47, Palestine Papers (CAS Archive Vol 10).
\(^{26}\) AIR 9/19, Air Ministry Palestine and Transjordan 1921-36, fol 9, 11 July 1924.
\(^{27}\) CO 733/320/4, Report of the High Commissioner on the Administration of Palestine 1920-1925.
proposals, disbanding the British Gendarmerie, creating a Palestine Police British Section, withdrawing the British cavalry regiment and forming the Transjordan Frontier Force (TJFF) under RAF command.

**The 1929 Riots**

The parsimony and muddle almost led to disaster in August 1929 when access to the Wailing Wall led to violence.29 Stewart Perowne from his Government office watched:

> Arabs breaking stones against the windows of the houses […]. Soon they began using guns and at least three grenades were thrown. At last they [the Police] arrived […]. The British Police fired a volley, and the place was soon clear. […] Meanwhile aeroplanes have been flying over the city.30

Arab policemen sided with the rioters. The RAF’s armoured cars were vulnerable in urban areas without infantry support. Every able-bodied European was made a special constable, including Perowne and thirty student Anglican priests, and so an Army brigade was deployed from Egypt and warship crews put ashore, and the brigade commander assumed command. When the violence ended, 133 Jews and 116 Arabs had been killed.31

The RAF, keen to regain control, sent Air Vice-Marshall Dowding to outrank and replace the Army commander.32 Both reported Army and RAF co-operation had

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28 AIR 9/19, fol 9, 11 July 1924.
29 Barker, 'Policing Palestine'.
30 MECA, Perowne Papers.
31 Barker, ‘Policing Palestine’.
32 Gwynn, p. 235.
been excellent, though 14 (Bomber) Squadron’s fourteen vintage DH9As were of limited use. Aircraft had been used in eleven actions; and for reconnaissance, liaison with the French, dropping proclamations and supplies, and the transport of fifty infantrymen in four Victoria transports from Cairo. The rules of engagement were ‘machine-gun fire will only be used when looters and incendiaries caught in act; when persons are caught flagrante delicato, committing acts of violence’. These events occurred in urban areas and infrequently present targets for air action.

After the riots two infantry battalions remained as part of the RAF led-garrison, the Air HQ moved to Jerusalem, and the Palestine Police were reformed again. The 1929 riots were seen as a failure of air control, though the Air Staff argues it had never been applied to Palestine, they had never suggested it should be, recognising air control’s limitations in urban area, and in any case the Army garrison of 4000 had not prevented the riots of 1921.

The first phase of the revolt – May to September 1936

Despite various reforms, the combination of the international situation in the Eastern Mediterranean, and increased Jewish immigration raised tensions. There was a Arab strike in 1933, and a campaign of low level terrorism led by Izz ad-Din al-Qassam, an Islamic militant. In late 1935 Air Chief Marshal Brook-Popham, commanding the

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33 Omissi, ‘Technology and Air Control in Palestine,’ p. 52.
34 Air 8/47, Palestine Papers (CAS Archive Vol 10).
35 AIR 8/47.
36 AIR 75/27, Slessor Papers. Air Control: the Other Point of View May 1931. Unpublished monograph, p. 34.
RAF in the Middle East, reported his RAF Special Service Officers (SSOs) and Police CID believed the Arabs thought their situation desperate, negotiations were achieving nothing and the only course of action left was violence. Their intention was ‘apparently not to operate in the towns where they realize riots can be easily suppressed, but by small gangs of about twenty causing trouble all over the country’.  

The murder of two Jews on 15 April 1936 started a cycle of violence. The Police fired on a Arab mob entering the Jewish Tel Aviv, RAF armoured cars were deployed, and No 6 Squadron RAF in Egypt for the Abyssinian crisis was placed on 24-hours notice to move to Palestine. An Arab ‘National Committee’ called a general strike. It was accompanied by violent disorder, sabotage, murder, and guerrilla groups in rural areas ambushing patrols and convoys.

The Mandatory Government adopted a conciliatory and defensive response, counter to the normal the British preference for ‘firm and timely action’. A Royal Commission would investigate Arab grievances once order was restored. A GOC later wrote:

Measures of an extreme nature, which, although they might well have suppressed the rebellion in shorter time and with less military effort, would invariably have left a legacy of bitterness and hatred which years of peace might well fail to eradicate.

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37 Brooke-Popham, 4/3/18, letter to CAS 22 December 1935, p. 3.
40 WO 191/88.
The garrison was rapidly reinforced by British forces based in Egypt and Malta for
the Abyssinian Crisis to eleven infantry battalions, and other troops, and elements of
four RAF squadrons and two RAF armoured car companies. The Army was
deployed for the protection of property and life, with one battalion as a mobile
reserve and the only offensive action were Police searches with Army cordons. RAF
squadrons held low readiness and conducted reconnaissance and leaflet dropping;
with rules of engagement as for the 1929 riots.

*The First XX Calls*

A RAF wireless tender accompanied an Army patrol for the first time on 9 June.
This marked the introduction of the ‘XX Call’ system whereby ground forces could
call air support. Aircraft readiness was heightened on 10 June to respond to any XX
call. The first XX call was on 11 June, but the responding aircraft was ‘unable to
take effective action as the Arabs dispersed and took refuge in caves’.

The security situation continued to worsen, the Arab Police became
unreliable, and new Emergency Regulations on 12 June 1936 gave the Army
additional powers, which were used to demolish several hundred houses for a road
though a no-go area in Jaffa, 6 Squadron dropping warning leaflets beforehand. All
aircraft were now held at five minutes readiness during daylight and flew dawn and

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42 Air 27/73 Operations Record Book (F540) No 6 (Bomber) Squadron.
dusk patrols, and low flying patrols of train and convoys. On 20 June, following a police warning, Flight Lieutenant Clark of 6 Squadron, escorting a convoy on the Tulkarm-Nablus road, saw it stop when ambushed. He called for assistance and nine aircraft were subsequently engaged in an action lasting until nightfall. The aircraft were hit a total of thirteen times and three were forced to land. The aircraft claimed fifteen enemy casualties.

Rules of engagement were gradually reduced. From 20 June the Air Ministry allowed the use of 20 lb bombs, directing ‘no bombing action within 1000 yards of any town or village, and following co-ordination with land forces in order to avoid any innocent parties being attacked from the air’. This was soon reduced to 500 yards and all aircraft routinely carried four 20 lb bombs.

**The Air Striking Force Concept**

The only opportunity for the British to engage the rebels was through immediate counter-attack.

The armed band as a rule concentrated only for attack: in defence it was concerned chiefly in running away to live another day, it held no ground, it had no headquarters and no communications at which to strike, and it depended for its armour on its elusiveness.

Normally, convoys were protected by armoured cars front and rear, and a small detachment of motorized infantry. If ambushed the escorts would return and the

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44 Air 27/73.
45 Brooke-Popham, 4/6/7 Cypher Message AM to AOC BFP & TJ 20 June 1936.
46 Gwynn, p. 376
infantry would also dismount but lacked the numbers, mobility and local knowledge for pursuit; whereas air escort virtually guaranteed a convoy or column would not be attacked.

Brigadier Evetts, the senior Army officer, deliberately tempted the armed bands to attack convoys in order that the RAF could respond, a vigorous approach more akin to Callwell’s small wars than Gwynn’s policing. According to Dill’s *Military Lessons* this response required an Air Striking Force specially organized to meet the peculiarities of local conditions; rapid communication with the RAF from the greatest possible number of Army detachments; provision of timely military information to the RAF units; close liaison between Army commanders and aircrews; and constant practice in working together. Air Commodore Hill, the deputy Air Commander, devised an air striking force concept to meet these requirements, far more sophisticated than any described in inter-war doctrine or in histories of air land integration:

Following in general form a similar air organisation which aided the rapid advance of ‘Bethels Force’ (the advance guard of the IVth Army) in the last phase of the war, 1914-1918, and utilising the principles inherent in the air defence plan, ADGB, the air striking force in Palestine was suitably deployed and held in immediate readiness to strike with concentration against the enemy (i.e. the armed band) when and where found. For this some form of intelligence screen was necessary to enable immediate information to reach the air striking force when an attack took place. […] this took the form of mobile W/T sets at possible points of contact with armed bands and low flying reconnaissance aircraft fitted with W/T.

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47 WO 191/70, p. 106.
51 Air 5/1244 Notes on Tactical Lessons of the Palestine Rebellion, 1936, p. 2.
Combined Operation Order No 8 ordered the implementation of the concept. Aircraft were based on dispersed landing grounds to ensure they were within striking distance. Heightened ground alert meant aircraft could be airborne within five minutes and overhead anywhere in Palestine within thirty minutes, and often quicker.\(^{52}\) Wireless Telegraphy (W/T) sets were installed in hired lorries, known as Rodex, which accompanied convoys and mobile columns thought likely to be attacked by rebels. Rodex or aircraft detecting the enemy sent out a XX call, which the RAF signals organisation transferred to the appropriate air base. Army communications could have been used but its hierarchical network meant messages would take longer. The RAF network was flat – all RAF W/T sets could talk to any other. Therefore the RAF net was also used for ‘GG’ calls to summon ground striking forces.\(^{53}\) Any method could be used for calls; for example the police used the telephone network. To identify locations main roads and railways were given index letters, or map references or bearing and distance from a known location were used. Aircraft also dropped messages and ground forces used large sheets with codes and also flares.

Uniquely for the time, the British forces were from June 1936 commanded from a Combined (in modern terminology Joint) Force HQ in the King David Hotel in Jerusalem where the staff worked and lived together.\(^{54}\) An Air Liaison Section based at Ramleh airfield allotted aircraft to tasks. Informal liaison was achieved at lower levels by frequent meetings. For example, on 15 June OC 6 Squadron visited

\(^{52}\) WO 191/70, p. 106-107.
\(^{53}\) WO 191/70, p. 54.
the HQ of both Brigades and three of the deployed battalions.Military intelligence was also combined, under the Chief Intelligence Officer Group Captain Buss, an Arabic-speaking Muslim. As the police became less reliable, the RAF SSOs became increasingly important; their number was doubled and duties redefined to procure political, military and topographical information.

A number of factors limited the air striking force concept. The Rodex lorries were tied to roads, the W/T sets were not manportable, and most Army units were not practised in air-land signals and codes. Army Co-operation aircraft could communicate air-to-ground, but bombers needed to let out and trail antenna, impossible in low-level actions. Also the pilots had to balance engaging the enemy and the risk of being hit by rifle fire. The aircraft typically flew at 500 ft to be able to see the enemy despite the risk. The ‘Arab credited the airman with an all-seeing eye and only too often tended to go to ground the moment an aeroplane appeared overhead’. The pilots were ordered to fly at ‘high speed in suspected areas’ and ‘delivering a bomb attack immediately with a view to breaking their resistance from the start’. No more than two aircraft were used together to avoid collision. The favoured tactic was to dive bomb from 1000 ft and use the front guns. Night operations were tried by flare light but were not successful. Psychological operations were also used. On 24 June 14,400 propaganda leaflets and 2650 warning leaflets were dropped. One leaflet appealed for restraint to allow the Royal

54 WO 191/70, p. 43.
55 Air 27/73.
57 WO 191/70, pp. 104-6
Commission to investigate, and warned of the economic effects on all but the rich, who were not exposing themselves to danger.\footnote{58 Brooke-Popham, 4/6/15, Pysops Leaflet.}

**Combined Action**

The number of combined actions increased in July due to increasing rebel activity and better co-ordination. On 9 July a Hart answered a call to search an area. Finding four armed Arabs who then hid in a hut, the pilot informed the road patrol and pinned the men in a hut until the patrol arrived, rather than inflict a few casualties and let the gang disperse.\footnote{59 Air 27/73.} On 19 July following an XX call, a Hart of 6 Squadron engaged fifteen rebels attacking a Jewish potash convoy on the Jericho-Jerusalem road. Another four aircraft joined the action, killing seven rebels, the aircraft being hit four times.\footnote{60 AIR 5/1244.} On 29 July the Police warned of another ambush of a Jewish convoy on the same road. The first aircraft arrived within nine minutes of the XX call, and attacked and pinned the retreating enemy down, killing eleven of them. In July, 6 Squadron responded to thirteen XX calls and claimed to have inflicted thirty-seven enemy casualties, and reported a similar tempo for August and September.

**The Armed Bands**

The armed bands grew in number and size, reinforced by sympathizers from Syria and Iraq. The bands totalled around 1500 to 2000 full-time partisans – often ex-
soldiers, criminals or adventurers not tied to one place.\textsuperscript{61} and could call on perhaps five-times as many locals for specific actions.\textsuperscript{62} Throughout the revolt, the rebels’ Achilles’ heel was the lack of modern weaponry, especially machine-guns for anti-aircraft fire.\textsuperscript{63} Many rifles dated from the First World War and the Syrian revolt against France. Some British reports are derogatory of Arab fighting qualities,\textsuperscript{64} though the advent of Fawzi Al-Qawuqji, a former Ottoman officer, who had fought against the French in Syria, before joining the Iraqi Army,\textsuperscript{65} improved the tactics of the armed bands.

They show signs of effective leadership and organisation, and actions are marked by stubborn resistance. Well equipped, and considerably strengthened in past few days. The [North] is particularly suitable for this form of guerrilla warfare. Reports continue to come in regarding the arrival of recruits from Syria and Iraq. Vigorous demands for food, ammunition, money etc by bands have been made from villages on an increasing scale.\textsuperscript{66}

\textit{Army Command}

By August the rebels controlled much of the countryside. 6 Squadron received XX calls most days. In August 6 Squadron received twelve XX calls and fourteen requests for immediate reconnaissance, causing an estimated eighty-four causalities, though at some risk.\textsuperscript{67} On 21 August two aircraft were hit by rifle fire while killing

\begin{itemize}
    \item \textsuperscript{61} Bowden, 'The Politics of the Arab Rebellion', p. 152.
    \item \textsuperscript{62} Joseph Nevo, 'Palestinian-Arab Violent Activity during the 1939s.', in Cohen and Kolinsky \textit{Britain and the Middle East in the 1930s}, pp. 169-189, (p. 180).
    \item \textsuperscript{63} Bowden, 'The Politics of the Arab Rebellion', p. 158.
    \item \textsuperscript{64} Air 5/1244, Notes on Tactical Lessons of the Palestine Rebellion, 1936.
    \item \textsuperscript{66} AIR 23/633, Disturbances in Palestine 1936 Weekly Resumé of Operations, No 19, 5-11 September 1936.
    \item \textsuperscript{67} Air 27/73.
\end{itemize}
two rebels and on 26 August an aircraft force-landed after being hit. Air Vice Marshal Peirse now proposed the use of coercive force to ‘cow the country’ using two additional squadrons to bomb Nablus and other hotbeds of rebellion, after warning the inhabitants to leave.\(^6^8\) Wauchope, the High Commissioner, did not support Peirse but copied his appreciation to the Cabinet.

On 2 September the Cabinet decided on ‘intensive measures, designed to crush Arab resistance’. Lieutenant-General Dill was dispatched with a second division, the Army calling-up all high readiness infantry reservists, and expecting to govern under martial law. Given Pierse’s proposals, the Cabinet ordered the measures ‘should not include any bombing of the civil population’.\(^6^9\) Following Iraqi offers to mediate (Peirse thought these a cover for Fawzi’s activities),\(^7^0\) the Cabinet realised Palestine was a dominant concern in Arab and Muslim politics.\(^7^1\)

Meanwhile the rules of engagement were relaxed to allow aircraft to suppress ground fire. When two aircraft of 6 Squadron responded to an XX call on the Nablus-Tulkarm road both aircraft were hit by fire from houses, one crashed killing Pilot Officer Hunter and AC1 Lincoln. In the second aircraft the Squadron Leader was hit in the knee. On 8 September the Government agreed ‘air action by machine-gun fire may be taken against a house or those houses in villages from which hostile rifle fire has been directed against aircraft and security forces’.\(^7^2\) The RAF was given permission to drop 112lb delayed-action bombs after eighteen Arabs were

\(^{6^8}\) CAB 24/263.  
\(^{6^9}\) CAB 23/85, CC 56 (36), p. 22.  
\(^{7^0}\) WO 32/4177.  
\(^{7^1}\) Kolinsky, *Britain’s War in the Middle East*, p. 2.
spotted digging trenches; four aircraft attacked leaving eight enemy dead and eight wounded. General permission to use 112lb bombs was given later.

RAF control ended when Dill assumed command on 15 September. Peirse declined appointment as Dill’s chief of staff, and Hill took over as Air Commander and Air Advisor. Large actions continued as 1st Division arrived. At Nablus on 24 September, the Royal Scots Fusiliers engaged several bands led by Fawzi. Aircraft responding to XX calls claimed forty-one out of the fifty enemy killed, firing 332 rounds from machine guns and dropping 33 bombs, with one aircraft hit in the radiator and forced to land, and Flying Officer Ramplini wounded in the wrist. The 6 Squadron Operational Record Book (ORB) records the moral effect of using large bombs on the population of Nablus but unfortunately there is no further explanation.

The threat of martial law, the promise of the commission, and the economic impact of the strike in the imminent citrus fruit harvest gave Wauchope room to negotiate a compromise. Though Dill expected to be military governor under martial law, which he thought would reduce the need for extra forces, there were doubts in London about the efficacy and legality of a martial law declaration, given the Mandate applied to Transjordan as well. However, the threat worked. The Aran Higher Committee called the strike off on 12 October following a face saving appeal by neighbouring Arab Kings to allow the Royal Commission, but with no surrender.

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72 Air 23/75.
73 Brooke-Popham, 4/6/56, Cypher Peirse to DCAS and BP 5 Sep 36 arguing against him being Dill’s BGGS.
74 Brooke-Popham, 4/3/57, Letter from Cairo 2 September 1936 about Palestine.
75 WO 32/4177.
the armed bands merely dispersed. The RAF was immediately ordered to stop offensive action. Official casualty figures were sixteen police and twenty-one soldiers killed, and 104 wounded; eighty-nine Jews and 195 Arabs killed, and over 1000 wounded. 6 Squadron alone claimed to have inflicted 230 casualties.

**Lessons**

Dill’s *Military Lessons* joint report was a comprehensive analysis of British operations, building upon Peirse’s earlier notes to Dill. Dill thought operations proved the guidance in *Notes on Imperial Policing*; the enemy half-hearted compared to Iraq in 1920; and mechanized units of limited use in difficult country. He reported

> The value of the Air Force, when arrangements can be made for it to be at instant call, has been most marked, […] Rebels hold the Air Force in such respect that on occasions it had the effect of driving them to cover or dispersing them before the troops could get in touch with them.  

> When it came to striking at the enemy in the hills it was usually upon the bombs and guns of his aircraft that the commander would rely for a concentration of force at the decisive point. The fact that in some months more than 50% of enemy casualties resulted from air action bears witness to their effect.  

> There were few engagements in which aircraft and troops did not work together in very close co-operation - so close in fact that ‘combined action’ is probably a better description. Practically every case of a successful attack on armed rebels resulted from the combined efforts of air and land forces; [Air] provided the commander with his principal weapon of offence. Local conditions of ground and policy combined to make it an especially effective weapon in Palestine.  

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79 WO 191/70, p. 104.
This ‘combined action’ needed quantities of radio sets, training in the use of codes, and understanding of each service: ‘troops newly arrived from home were at first rather at sea in this matter’. All detachments needed to know how to communicate with aircraft. The RAF thought the infantry could move more quickly than they could. Ground forces often left too much to the RAF and needed to follow up to take prisoners or capture weapons. Air resupply increased troops' mobility. The RAF made ‘it possible to send out comparatively small columns without any qualms about their safety. The knowledge of the rapid support they can bring has a very great moral effect on everyone concerned’.  

The Second Phase – September 1937 to December 1939

The uneasy peace continued during Peel’s Royal Commission while both sides prepared for further conflict. Arab terrorism against collaborators continued, for example with the murder of the Arab head of Police CID in Haifa. The British expected unrest after Peel’s report, any subsequent challenge to ‘fairness’ of the Empire would require ‘a very firm line’. Peel’s report recommended partition. The Arabs rejected it. The British government also accepted Peel’s recommendation that in the event of disorder statutory martial law be declared and GOC made military governor. There was to be no punitive bombing, though identified armed

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81 Nevo, p. 178.
83 PREM 1/352, PM Correspondence Palestine 1936-39 Ormsby-Gore to PM 11 March 37.
rebels who were ‘either using or have just used their arms’ were to be engaged.\textsuperscript{85} The Foreign Secretary was concerned about wider Arab opinion and warned indiscriminate bombing in Yemen had provoked international condemnation.\textsuperscript{86} though one historian has subsequently described this particular action as ‘the quintessential operation of minimum force’.

\textit{September 1937: The Revolt Resumes}

When the District Commissioner for Galilee was murdered in September 1937, the British response was immediate and aggressive, declaring the AHC illegal. The RAF flew six Arab leaders to exile in the Seychelles and removed the Mufti from his official posts. He fled to Damascus to form the Central Committee of Jihad.\textsuperscript{89} Rebel leadership fragmented, the urban \textit{effendi} class being increasingly replaced by peasant terrorists who targeted fellow Arabs.\textsuperscript{90} Six peasant partisan commanders formed the titular Bureau of the Arab Revolt in Palestine.\textsuperscript{91} By October 1937 Arab armed bands established control over Samaria and Galilee.\textsuperscript{92}

The British introduced military courts and appointed Sir Charles Tegart of the Indian police to advise the police on reforms, and a subsequent head of MI5 to

\textsuperscript{85} WO 282/1, Summary of Points Discussed at a London Conference Concerning the Use of Force, 16 February 1937.
\textsuperscript{86} PREM 1/352, fol 189 Eden letter to Chamberlain, 7 February 1938.
\textsuperscript{87} Mockaitis, pp. 31-33.
\textsuperscript{88} Bowden, ‘The Politics of the Arab Rebellion’, p. 165.
\textsuperscript{89} WO 191/88, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{90} Bowden, ‘The Politics of the Arab Rebellion’, p. 159.
\textsuperscript{91} Swedenburg.
advice on intelligence. 93 Tegart’s report recommended a tough paramilitary police force, police barracks to protect Arab police from intimidation, a fence along the Northern border to separate the rebels from support in Syria, and a CID able to collect information. 94 The death penalty was introduced for the use or carriage of firearms or explosives, and within six months eleven Arabs were executed on such charges. 95

December 1937 to April 1938: Resumption of XX Calls and Mobile Columns

The two remaining brigades conducted cordon and search operations using mobile columns of 100 men reliant on air support. 6 Squadron’s first XX call was not until December, after deploying from Egypt to Palestine in October. Initially the bands operated in large numbers. On 31 January 1938 a rebel group, perhaps 200 strong, tried to envelop one column in the Muss Muss pass. ‘Hard pressed’, the column was in danger of being overwhelmed, when:

Aircraft, summoned by wireless gave most valuable support for the infantry. A succession of gallant and skilful air attacks was largely responsible for driving off the enemy and inflicting severe casualties. Our casualties were two other ranks killed and two other ranks wounded. The enemy casualties were estimated to be 20 to 30 dead. […] The air co-operation was admirable and the pilots pursued the retiring enemy in the gathering dark, some of them being obliged to land on their aerodrome in the dark. 96

93 CO 733/355/8, Sir C Tegart's Mission to Palestine, Colonial Office Minute (M1) 19 October 1937.
95 WO 191/88.
96 AIR 5/1244, Chapter 18, pp. 8-9.
In another large action on 3 March 1938 a XX call from a column of the Border Regiment, under heavy fire from high ground near the Jenin-Haifa road, was answered within fifteen minutes by four aircraft. The rebel band split into two, and was pursued by other columns and numerous aircraft sorties until dark. The rebels’ strength was estimated to be between 300 and 400 men. The British claimed to have killed sixty, over half by aircraft for the loss of one killed, and three wounded. Thirty bodies were found, and sixteen prisoners and seventeen rifles captured. Five aircraft were hit, none seriously. Aircraft dropped forty-seven bombs and fired 5000 rounds. The rebels, unusually, fought to hold ground on a 3000 yards front. The new GOC, Wavell, was as complementary as Dill of the RAF’s ‘constant and untiring support to the Land Forces’, of the RAF Armoured Car Company, and the RAF SSOs who ‘rendered most valuable service in obtaining information in difficult circumstances’.  

Columns without Rodex W/T lorries took longer to call support. On 16 May 1938 a column, after capturing a rebel under a bed, came under fire at 1215. It took fifty minutes for the Royal Signals to erect a mast, wait for a lull in signal traffic, and make the XX call. Four aircraft arrived at 1350, engaged with bombs and machine-guns, observing nine Arab causalities. Ground fire wrecked one aircraft’s W/T set. The air support enabled the column to break contact at 1440 and the exhausted troops’ retreat was covered by one aircraft. At 1725 this aircraft engaged other armed Arabs nearby. The column again debussed and advanced to the scene of the

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97 Air 27/73.
98 AIR 5/1244, Chapter 18, pp. 8-14.
action. The pilot, Sergeant Coggins, immediately sent an XX call while killing two Arabs with his front guns. He continued to engage the Arabs while joined by three more aircraft, as other units marched towards the aircraft. Coggins was awarded the DFM.

May to August 1938: Village Occupation and the Frontier Fence

Reinforcement enabled the British to start securing the population by occupying around twenty villages in Galilee. Each post consisted of one officer and 40 men, and a W/T set. As with Lyautey’s tache d’oeil, the object was to clear, hold and build; deny the village and its neighbourhood to the gangs as a source of food, shelter and recruitment; assist the civil authorities to get control of the area; protect, and gain the confidence of law abiding inhabitants; and assist in access to inaccessible parts by road making and patrols. Each post had a five kilometre sphere of influence.

The rebels learnt to avoid large actions and to operate at night to avoid aircraft. A captured Arabic document, known as the Damascus Field Service Regulations (FSR), noted:

a. The best protection is to lie flat, close to natural cover, and keep absolutely still. This makes it difficult for the aeroplane to observe the gang, particularly if clothing blends in colour with the natural surroundings. Note: it must be remembered that the fragments from bombs fly upwards and affect men standing up more than men lying down.

b. Except for defence and in cases of necessity aircraft should not be fired at.

c. Dispersion affords protection and reduced effect of fire-bomb.

100 AIR 5/1244 Chapter 18.
102 Nevo, p. 178.
d. Rapid change of position so that spies cannot give reliable information as a result of which aeroplanes can bomb the band.¹⁰³

Increasing rebel activity at night led to the formation of Orde Wingate’s Special Night Squads (SNS) from May 1938. With British officers, soldiers and Jewish police auxiliaries, the SNS had an exceptionally high rate of contact with Arab bands based on good intelligence.¹⁰⁴

The rebels fought back in July and August as the end of the harvest freed peasant support for the bands,¹⁰⁵ and their tactical skill developed.¹⁰⁶ Arab police posts were overrun, confidence was lost in their reliability, and they were disarmed.¹⁰⁷ Tegart’s border fence to isolate rebels was completed and patrolled by the Army, Police, and RAF aircraft but with little effect. Arab peasant gangs dominated the countryside setting up alternative courts, raised taxes, and intimidated the urban elite, many of whom fled.¹⁰⁸

**September to October 1938: Major Reinforcement**

The deployment of British forces from Palestine to Egypt during the September Czechoslovak Crisis led to the new AOC, Air Commodore Harris, reporting:

> For at least the next fortnight we shall remain, as we are now, cut to the bone for troops. The defence of Jerusalem, which is momentarily threatened with attack, is only one company of Black Watch, two and a half sections of my...

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¹⁰³ WO 191/88, p. 11
¹⁰⁴ Anglim, 'Orde Wingate and the British Army,' pp. 100-134.
¹⁰⁵ Nevo, p. 178.
¹⁰⁷ WO 191/88, p. 4
¹⁰⁸ CO 935/21, Despatch 24 October 1938.
armoured cars and the airmen from the billet who have been organized into a company as a night reserve.

For RAF armoured car crews ‘as the civil-writ no longer runs, all the advice I can give them is that when in aid of the (non-existent) civil power, they should fire when they must and keep on firing as long as appears militarily essential’. He fitted his SSOs’ unmarked cars ‘with two Mauser sub-machine gangster-guns’ to ‘produce a terrific rate and spread of fire ahead to compete with the bandits dressed as Palestine police who now do much of the holdup work’. In that event of European war, Harris thought:

We must (and under such circumstances can) make up for a lack of numbers by using rougher methods with the rebels than we dare do in peace. One 250lb or 500lb in each village that speaks out of turn within a few minutes or hours of having so spoken; or the complete blotting out of a few selected haunts, *pour encourager les autres*.

Meanwhile a conference at the Colonial Office on 7 September 1938 planned to double the garrison to two divisions as soon as the crisis allowed. On 14 September the COS when warning of overstretch war against Japan, Germany and Italy simultaneously in 1938 noted the distraction of Palestine and the need to avoid spreading Arab dissatisfaction. From this point the British seem resolved to address the Revolt militarily and politically.

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Aircraft Losses

The cost in aircraft of the Army’s reliance on air support greatly concerned Harris. In August Flying Officer Waddell and AC1 Jennings were killed when their Hardy was shot down in an action that claimed fifty-three enemy. Their Squadron was given orders to shoot anyone within 1000 yards of the crash site. On 15 September there were reports of rebel bands gathering for photographs near Deir Ghassan. 500-600 men were located and thirteen aircraft from three squadrons dropped 48 bombs and fired 6000 rounds, claiming 143-176 estimated enemy casualties at the cost of five damaged aircraft, one aircraft was hit in eleven places and one in sixteen. On 1 October in an action near Ramallah the crew of a damaged Hardy bailed out and were recovered. On 11 October two aircraft were lost and one pilot was not seen again after bailing out. On 10 November, a 33 (F) Squadron Gladiator was lost with its pilot.111

Gladiators and Special Night Squads

Harris listed his concerns to AOC ME. Harris thought that other than when aircraft ‘get stuck into worthwhile targets (and the oozlebart is getting cleverer daily at avoiding this) the best oozlebart work is done by 'special' night squads (very secret’).112 Wingate’s SNS had more success inflicting casualties on Arab bands

110 CAB 24/278, CP 199 (38) Appreciation of the Situation in the Event of War Against Germany 14 September 1938, p. 15 and p. 10.
111 Air 27/73.
than Regular Army units whose ‘chances of contact with an enemy, who is an enemy one moment and a peaceful villager the next, almost negligible’, albeit using controversial techniques. Harris thought a gendarmerie made up of SNS-type groups, with the backing of air power, was the solution. Harris wanted more Gladiators:

In this regard the Glosters [Gladiators] are an outstanding success. Not only are they killing oozlebars wholesale with their four front guns, and many more than the Hardys and Hinds in equivalent situations, but they are doing it, in my opinion, with vastly less risk to the crews. No 6 Squadron losses, compared with the total number of fighting crews, have been so heavy lately that one wishes, if it is at all possible, to provide the safest as well as the most efficient aircraft for their highly dangerous task of ground strafing.

He also thought ‘the only thing the Arab understands is the heavy hand and, sooner or later, it will have to be applied’. Instead the War Office sent reinforcements, military commanders took control of the districts, district commissioners became their political advisors, and the Police were placed under the GOC’s control.

November 1938 to January 1939: Offensive Operations and Airpin

The British, reinforced and reorganized, quickly regained the implemented population control measures. In particular all road movement was controlled. Major-General O’Connor reoccupied the Old City of Jerusalem which had been

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113 Air 23/765, Harris to Nichol 5 September 1938. pp. 4-5.
114 Air 23/765, Harris to Nichol, 15 September 1938, p. 2.
115 CO 733/367/2.
under rebel control. Though he did not to use aircraft in Jerusalem he was aware of their value. He reported after an ambush:

Throughout, we were in wireless touch with our escorting aeroplane, as a result of an XX call, three more aircraft came out to our assistance. This was the normal emergency procedure, which worked very well.  

Throughout 1938, seventy-seven Britons, 255 Jews, and 503 Arabs were killed and there were over 4000 incidents. However the Arab population was tiring of restrictions and rebel intimidation and some were forming peace bands against the rebels. 

Harris thought British troops were becoming over reliant on air and while successful engagements were taking place, RAF casualties were out of proportion. Cordon and searches failed because rebels were warned of approaching troops. Therefore Harris introduced the ‘airpin’; ‘a system of cordoning villages from the air pending the arrival of ground forces’. Rebels, expecting a search, attempted to leave so a further development were ‘Vilpats’ or flushing patrols, or as Harris put it ‘drop leaflets [from a Hart] and shoot anyone escaping with multi-gun Gladiator’. According to Harris, after three months this technique was thoroughly understood by the inhabitants of the villages; he does not record how many innocents were shot in these first three months.

119 Swedenburg.
121 Air 27/73.
There was brutality by British soldiers and police in this period. The GOC’s explanation described the difficulty of combating a fragmented revolt, using intimidation and where the enemy hides amongst women and children. He defended the use of cordon and search operations, where those escaping were shot, and collective punishments when individuals could not be identified. However none of the Pamphlets which detailed charges of brutality against British forces listed the indiscriminate use of air power, implying the RAF complied with the rules of engagement.

*February to May 39: The Cracking of Rebellion*

By February 1939 the backbone of the Revolt had been defeated. Arab leaders were becoming hunted outlaws and losing prestige. Rebel activities were limited to sniping by night, attempts to sabotage communications; and the murder of collaborators.

The rebels were progressively driven into Transjordan and the RAF followed them. In March at Zemel on the border, Hardys of 6 Squadron came under heavy fire while engaging an armed band in a wadi. Sergeant Coggins was hit by rifle fire twice below the heart while flying the Commanding Officer of the TJFF over the

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122 Harris, Lecture notes 'Palestine', p. 18.
123 CAB 23/282, CP 5 (39), Palestine 1938 – Allegations Against British Troops.
battle, receiving a bar to his DFM. The RAF eventually employed Wellesley bombers of 14 Squadron to bomb the rebels and with the TJFF killed forty-eight rebels, including four leaders, one of whom wore colonel’s badges. As the rebel bands grew smaller a variation of the XX call, the RR call was adopted for when one aircraft only was required.

The military suppression of the rebellion ran in parallel to a political solution. After the London Conference with Palestinian Arabs, neighbouring Arab States and the Jewish Agency, the British government’s White Paper of 17 May declared Palestine independence within ten-years, and Jewish immigration and land sales to Jews limited.

_June to December 1939: Steady Improvement_

As Montgomery and others predicted violence continued. The TJFF captured forty-three armed Jews in October and killed five and captured five armed Arabs in December. No 2 Armoured Car Company RAF remained in Palestine until moved to the Western Desert in 1940. Its ORB of in 1939 reported ‘general conditions in Palestine unchanged. Both Arabs and Jews giving trouble, considerable sniping done and land mines used during the month [sic]’. On 31 August 1939 ‘it was most noticeable that Arab gangs took advantage of the European situation to re-organize

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127 AIR 2/5069, TJFF Annual Report 1939.
128 Harris, Lecture notes ‘Palestine’, p. 22.
131 WO 216/46, Brief Notes on Palestine.
132 AIR 2/5069.
gang warfare’, and on 4 September a Fordson tender hit a mine on Hebron road killing AC1 Slade, the company’s first fatality during the Revolt. In December 1939 the new GOC declared Palestine to be in a state of ‘peace and normality’.

Lessons

What were the immediate lessons of the use of air power during the Revolt? British commanders in Palestine realized the value of operations there in preparing for war. Montgomery, whose wartime success was based on preparation, thought:

The war out here is the most magnificent training for the Army and the RAF, and we are producing seasoned fighting men second to none. The essential thing at the moment for all troops in Palestine is training in the methods of first class, or even second class, war.

There were limits to the value of Palestine in preparing for a European war. Montgomery acknowledged he was fighting ‘a savage and mobile enemy, who is armed only with the rifle and the knife - they know nothing about other forms of war’ and battalions were organized in ‘mobile columns, and not the latest British war establishment’. Likewise Harris was trying to ‘balance using his Wellesley bombers to machine-gun rebels and train for bombing the Italians in the Dodecanese’. However, Air-land relations were built up at unit level in a way they would not be in the UK; the 11th Hussars and 208 (Army Co-operation) Squadron RAF in Palestine, routinely exchanged officers in order to understand each

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133 AIR 29/54, ORB: No 2 Armoured Car Company.
135 WO 216/46.
other’s capabilities, and one historian has linked Wavell and O’Connor’s use of fast-moving all arms columns in the Western Desert in 1940 with the British experience in Palestine.

Air Commodore Hill proposed wider use was made of the Palestine air striking force concept. The Air Ministry’s Deputy Director Operations noted Hill’s points about the mobility of air power: ‘in effect, the convoys and the troops were the bait to force the enemy to concentrate. Aircraft were the trap’. But he thought the lessons for general war limited: there was no enemy air defence and no properly organized resistance in Palestine. He told Peirse, now Deputy Chief of Air Staff:

I must confess that I am astounded that such an objective student of war as A/C Hill should put forward such views. The two problems are so totally dissimilar. In a European war, the strategical reconnaissance squadrons allotted to the Army (the 2 Blenheim squadrons) should keep a close check on the enemy’s strategical movements. The exact moment the enemy's deployment should be accurately gauged by deduction and confirmed by the Army Co-operations medium reconnaissance aircraft, which can direct the air striking force as required. It is one thing to observe in a two-seater Hart or Gordon flying at 100 mph with no opposition to guard against for an enemy's deployment and quite another to fly a similar mission in a Spitfire at 300 mph with every form of air opposition to consider […] A/C Hill's suggestion is quite impracticable.

Peirse, who of course was AOC when Hill developed the concept, was more positive.

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136 AIR 23/765, Harris to Nichol 5 September 1938, p. 4.
138 Anglim, ‘Callwell versus Graziani’.
139 AIR 5/1244, Notes on Tactical Lessons of the Palestine Rebellion, pp. 2-3.
I agree unquestionably that there will be occasions both in Empire policing and in a major war when direct support of ground forces by aircraft and the direct exploitation of air action by ground forces may be desirable, if not essential. […] You will be glad to hear that in conjunction with the war office we are arranging Exercises during the forthcoming training Season to study this problem. The questions relating to communication, intelligence requirements and methods of attack will be explored and we hope to get useful answers.¹⁴¹

Despite the lessons of Palestine and Peirse’s proposed experiments, the British did not develop an effective doctrine for air-land integration until after defeat in France.

Conclusions

The Arab Revolt represented the most severe challenge to British colonial rule since the Anglo-Irish war. In each phase of the rebellion the rebels controlled much of the countryside and, at its apogee in September 1938, many of the urban areas as well. The Revolt was in many ways modern in its character. There were various dimensions: racial, religious, colonial, familial and peasant, and the rebels mixed terrorism, guerrilla warfare, criminal activity and civil disobedience. There were several conflicts within one – Arab and Jew, Arab and British, inter-Arab, latent Jew and British, and to a degree proxy: Germany and Italy versus Britain and France and all sides had external support.¹⁴² By suppressing the Revolt Britain succeeded in its strategic objective of retaining Palestine maintaining the support of its Arab allies throughout the Second World War, having realised the Arabs were more important strategically than the Jews.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.
The RAF played a key role in the military suppression of the Revolt which preceded the political solution of the White Paper. RAF firepower, available at short-notice, was critical to British success in various ways. First, the RAF was the main cause of rebel casualties in engagements with British; the rebels were often lured to attack to allow aircraft to attack them. Second, the aircraft provided both the mobility and firepower needed to outmanoeuvre the rebels and engage them in the difficult terrain of the rebels’ choosing. Third, the aircraft allowed British ground forces to increase their mobility by reducing their dependence on integral fire support. Fourth they enabled the British to secure lines of communication, protecting convoys and trains with small escorts. Fifth, they enabled commanders to use smaller formations than they would otherwise have done, accepting that if ground forces were overmatched, they could call on air support. Though small pickets and Police patrols were on occasion ambushed, the British won every tactical engagement. Sixth, the aircraft provided valuable reconnaissance. An unintended consequence was the insurgents adapted to avoid air power and in the later stages of the insurgency avoided concentrating and operated at night. In turn the British adapted with Wingate’s night squads. In this sense again the RAF’s contribution has a very modern feel. Finally the RAF’ strategic mobility meant its squadrons could respond to changing strategic priorities, moving from protecting Egypt from Italy to suppressing the rebellion Palestine within hours.

The RAF was able to severely damage the rebels despite the tight rules of engagement. These were imposed politically, notwithstanding the military
preference for firm and timely force, by a Cabinet determined to avoid accusations of the indiscriminate use of air power in order to win Arab support. The initial restriction of machine-guns only against rebels in contact were loosened, and airmen reported using bombs in towns. Nevertheless though there is much evidence of British brutality, reprisals and demolitions in the archives researched, none is directed at aircraft, indicating the RAF kept within the rules.

The levels of air-land integration achieved during the Revolt challenge the orthodox view the RAF ignored close air support between the wars. Instead, this paper reveals an air striking force concept used in Palestine that heralded the advent of tactical air forces, with fighter-bombers exploiting Allied control of the air, later in the Second World War.143 Front-line fighters, as the Gladiator was in 1938/39, were used for close air support to great effect. The combined HQ ensured unity of effort and the separate signals organization was similar to that developed by Wann and Woodall in their experiments, complete with ‘tentacles’ in the form of W/T Rodex lorries and an air support centre co-ordination.

Though pivotal to British success, the RAF’s ability to shape operations, and attack the insurgent networks from distance, was limited. The RAF understood the utility of intelligence as a force multiplier and there is evidence the RAF SSOs and Police understood armed band organisation and could warn of rebel activity, enabling RAF targeting. Aerial reconnaissance also led to engagements. However the RAF was unable to attack insurgent networks or interdict its supply lines.

Harris’s ‘airpin’ tactics meant the RAF was not purely reactive in cordon and search operations or, to paraphrase him, getting the Army out of trouble. Harris’ notion of SNS intelligence-led air attacks was not feasible given aircraft limitations at night.

Further research might enable the determination of the air striking force concept, how much the detailed tactical co-operation of aircraft and RAF armoured cars in Palestine was used previously in implementing air control, or establish a more robust evidential link between the air striking force concept and the development of air-land integration in the Western Desert in 1940-41. Was it, as Terraine has said, in response to ‘needs must’ that Wann and Woodhall, and the WDAF developed similar air support organizations in 1940-41 to that developed in Palestine just a few years before, or did Palestine inform the development. 144

RAF operations in Palestine provide an intriguing example of the utility of air power in a modern context. Air power cannot win counter-insurgency on its own, just as the military cannot on its own. But the RAF proved through adaptation in Palestine and through a willingness to make air-land integration work, that it can have an enormous effect.

144 Terraine, The End of the Beginning (p. 12).