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## British intelligence and the Dardanelles: the 1906 Taba affair revisited

Yusuf Ali Ozkan 

### ABSTRACT

This article revisits British assessments on the Dardanelles during and after the Taba crisis in 1906. It is known that the assessments produced throughout 1906 were pessimistic. What is missing from the current historiography is the intelligence dimension. This paper fills this gap by arguing that the assessments were pessimistic because military and political assessors knew that the Dardanelles defences were strong. They knew this fact because British intelligence departments had compiled detailed and accurate information demonstrating that the Dardanelles defence system had been modernised and strengthened by the Ottomans over the preceding three decades.

### Introduction

British military and political figures had produced different assessments on the Dardanelles almost since the Napoleonic Wars, when the British fleet led by Admiral Sir John Duckworth had in 1807 forced the Turkish Straits and passed into the Sea of Marmara for a fruitless expedition. Historians studying the 1915 Dardanelles campaign highlight these pre-First World War assessments in their studies.<sup>1</sup> However, they failed to cover one important event: the Taba affair of 1906, a minor border dispute in Sinai between the Ottomans and the British. Although this small town of Taba was far away from the Turkish Straits, the minor border dispute that occurred there in early 1906 was important in many aspects. This incident, as one historian rightly suggested, showed how the Ottomans turned into a potential threat in the eyes of London, leading to the latter increasing military assessments and intelligence collection,<sup>2</sup> resulting in different British assessments on the Dardanelles being produced throughout 1906. These assessments were important because the advisability of forcing the Straits was thoroughly discussed in the higher echelons of Whitehall for the final time before 1914. More importantly, the heads of military and naval intelligence were involved in the discussions.

This paper explores the Taba affair of 1906 and British assessments on the Dardanelles produced in the incident's aftermath by bringing a fresh perspective. It will demonstrate how pessimistic the British assessments on the advisability of an operation against the Dardanelles were, suggesting that it would be dangerous and involve great risks. There are some studies examining the Taba affair and British assessments.<sup>3</sup> The existing historiography, however, does not extend to exploring why those assessments were pessimistic, merely approaching the issue from a diplomatic history or British strategy point of view to explain how the crisis evolved. This article attempts to bring a novel explanation of why military and political figures in 1906 saw that such an operation would be dangerous. Military and political decision-makers were aware that the Dardanelles defences were strong and thus a naval or joint operation would be likely to end in failure. The impregnable nature

of the defences, it will be demonstrated in this paper, was known to military and political assessors by 1906 because British military and naval intelligence had compiled very detailed and accurate information about the Dardanelles defences since the Great Eastern Crisis of 1875–78.

This work also demonstrates that information collection before 1914 was successful and intelligence more closely integrated into the decision-making apparatus of the British state than is commonly accepted. With the institutionalisation of British intelligence in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Whitehall had an efficient and systematic information collection machinery. This case study illustrates how successfully this machinery had functioned prior to the war's outbreak in 1914. It also shows that the British had effectively collated information before the foundation of the Secret Service Bureau in 1909. There are some historians who have already put forward the success of Britain's pre-1914 intelligence collection.<sup>4</sup> However, their studies predominantly focus on Russia, France, and Germany. British pre-1914 intelligence was more diverse, as this article will show. Information was collected not only about Britain's chief rivals of the era, but also about other powers and locations, like the Ottoman Empire and the Dardanelles. Furthermore, with this work, we can see that intelligence appears to have impacted British decision-makers before the formal and professional relationship between intelligence and decision-making was established with the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), founded in 1936. Furthermore, as the following sections will show, this work also contributes to understanding British strategic thinking on combined operations prior to the First World War by revealing discussions over joint operations in the Dardanelles.

### **The crisis: the Taba affair**

The Taba affair, while being a small incident, marked a watershed in British-Ottoman relations. London had a friendly relationship with the Sublime Porte throughout the nineteenth century largely because the former had seen the latter as a natural barrier against Russian expansionism. During the Great Game of the nineteenth century, the main British strategy in the Near East was to prevent Russia from reaching the Mediterranean and the Middle East from the north. To this end, the British had even sided with the Ottomans in the Crimean War against Russia in 1853–56. Particularly during the last two decades of the 1800s, the Ottoman Empire's position became vital again to London as a hedge against the potential threat of Franco-Russian dual alliance. The Empire's unique position, specifically its control over the Turkish Straits, would play an important role for the British in impeding the efforts of two adversary fleets combining in the Mediterranean and threatening British shipping. Therefore, London wanted to maintain good relations with the Sublime Porte throughout the century.

The friendly approach of Britain towards Turkey changed in 1906. This change was not sudden. The two empires started to become gradually more antagonistic towards one another from the last decade of the nineteenth century, and this antagonism appears to have reached its climax in 1906. Some historians explain this change with the new foreign policy of the Sultan Abdulhamid II, who adopted a policy of 'balance' that aimed to approach all powers equally to preserve his fragile empire.<sup>5</sup> The Sultan saw that the British Empire, in addition to Russia, was now the principal enemy and used Germany to balance the other powers, particularly Britain and Russia.

Although the crisis in Taba played an important role in this change, there were some other contributing factors that affected the British strategic mind. Firstly, Britain's principal rivals of the late 1800s, France and Russia, were no longer assessed to be enemies at the beginning of the new century. British naval intelligence had already estimated by 1900 that the threat of Russian and French navies, even if combined, to British interests in the Eastern Mediterranean and in other potential theatres of war was negligible, largely because of the huge expansion of the Royal Navy and the small expenditure of the two powers on their navies.<sup>6</sup> The conclusion of the Entente Cordiale with France in 1904 greatly relieved the anxieties of Whitehall. The defeat by Japan in 1905 dealt a death blow to the declining power of Russia and evaporated British fears nearly completely. The Russo-Japanese War demonstrated deep-seated problems in Russia's capability to mobilise and sustain an effective army

and navy. This would impact its capacity to undertake a large campaign in the Middle East. Foreign Secretary Edward Grey highlighted this point, saying that 'for a number of years . . . [Russia] would be quite incapable of undertaking a serious campaign'.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, leading figures in the Admiralty believed that the Russian navy could no longer create a serious threat in the Mediterranean.<sup>8</sup>

Another important development was the opening of the Suez Canal. The Eastern Mediterranean became vital for Britain after the canal was opened in 1869. The Arabi rebellion in 1880 ended up with the British occupation of Egypt in 1882. The main motivation of Britain was to secure the Suez Canal, which became its new delicate point. This had gradually downgraded the importance of the Ottoman Empire's unique position against Russia for Britain, as the latter had now troops on the ground to protect its interests in the region itself. Even a Russian occupation of Constantinople, the Director of Naval Intelligence (DNI) assessed in 1903, 'would not make any marked difference in our strategic dispositions [in the Eastern Mediterranean]'.<sup>9</sup> The Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) had agreed with the DNI on the point that a Russian occupation 'would not fundamentally alter the present strategic position in the Mediterranean'.<sup>10</sup> These developments caused the unique strategic position of the Ottoman Empire to lessen in the eyes of Whitehall. In other words, the friendly relationship with the Porte was no longer a *sine qua non* of British interests in the Near East.

The crisis in Taba erupted in early 1906 because of a small dispute over the Ottoman-Egyptian border. When a group of Egyptian border police, led by a British officer, came to Aqaba to build a series of guard posts, the Ottomans had increased their military presence in the area.<sup>11</sup> The Porte, at the same time, initiated a diplomatic process in London for claiming the control of the area based on an 1892 telegram. This act was more than enough to make London and Lord Cromer, the consul general in Egypt, worried over the security of the Suez Canal, which was believed to be protected only with the control of the Sinai Peninsula. Grey, who suspected German meddling in the region, did not seem to believe that the Ottomans could threaten the Peninsula, but he thought that if they 'established in it they could threaten Egypt & the Canal by making a base and communications in the Peninsula'.<sup>12</sup> The British eventually decided to send an ultimatum to Abdulhamid II in early May to evacuate Taba and other places in Sinai.

Before the British ultimatum expired, the CID met to figure out coercive measures should the Sultan decline the terms. Among different potential countermeasures, the CID secretary George Clarke proposed, before the actual meeting, to send British battleships to Constantinople through the Dardanelles.<sup>13</sup> However, his suggestion was not welcomed on the grounds that this option 'should be reserved for some more serious occasion' and that 'an operation would involve great risks'.<sup>14</sup> Finally, the Committee agreed on the occupation of two Aegean Islands if the Sultan did not comply. However, London did not need to implement the planned countermeasures as Abdulhamid II acknowledged that the Ottoman troops would withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula and the negotiations to determine the exact border between Egypt and the Ottoman Empire would start soon. As one historian puts forward, 'the strong diplomatic message, together with the deployment of British naval power, had proved effective'.<sup>15</sup>

Historians have produced decent works explaining the evolution of British strategic planning regarding the Turkish Straits or the Taba affair specifically.<sup>16</sup> Some of them demonstrate how military and naval intelligence heads contributed to the discussions during and after the Taba affair. However, some questions remain unanswered in these studies, such as why the departments and assessors were pessimistic about forcing the Straits. As detailed below, the assessments were pessimistic because they knew the Turkish defences in the Dardanelles were strong. They were aware of this fact since British naval and military intelligence, as this study demonstrates, collated detailed information.

### Assessments after the incident

The Taba affair had uncovered an important problem: Britain had no offensive strategy against the Ottoman Empire and realised that it should have one for future crises.<sup>17</sup> Increasing German influence within the Ottoman Empire had been monitored by London. The German influence

seems to have further aggravated British fears and contributed to their efforts to develop an offensive strategy. Because of its proximity to the Turkish capital, the Dardanelles was thought to be the most obvious and natural target to start devising a plan. Following the conclusion of the crisis in Taba until early 1907, the Dardanelles issue was thus discussed by the Whitehall departments to understand if an operation would be practicable. Based on the discussions throughout this period, there are two emerging themes. It can be confidently claimed based on the archival documents that almost all British assessments painted pessimistic pictures about the practicality of an operation, stating that any enterprise would be dangerous and should not be carried out without the assistance of military forces. They expected a dangerous operation because they were aware of the fact that the Turks had modernised and strengthened their defences in the Dardanelles. They therefore estimated that any British naval or military action would be counteracted with heavy resistance by the defenders.

Lord Cromer pioneered the discussions over the Turkish straits. He suggested right after the crisis that this question should be studied by naval and military departments to identify 'whether forcing the Dardanelles is at all a possible measure by joint and naval military action'.<sup>18</sup> After his request, the CID had met again in July 1906 and the Dardanelles was on the agenda.<sup>19</sup> None of the attendees on the day foresaw an easy operation. Presumably having received professional advice from his department as a politician, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord Tweedmouth pointed out the difficulties in a naval operation because the forts along the Narrows had now more powerful guns than before. The opinion of the DNI, Captain Charles Ottley, did not differ. He believed that the forts had significant advantages over ships, as the recent Russo-Japanese War had shown. Similarly, the First Sea Lord, Sir John Fisher, thought that 'an operation would involve great risks'.<sup>20</sup> Lord Esher, a member of the CID, and General James Grierson, Director of Military Operations and Intelligence, both were of the opinion that an expeditionary force would need to accompany the fleet. The CID had not reached any final decision on this meeting but concluded that 'the whole question [of the Dardanelles] should be thoroughly investigated by the Admiralty and the War Office, and a Report should be prepared for the consideration of the Committee'.<sup>21</sup>

Following this conclusion, the fighting departments started working on the issue. The first detailed work came from the Naval Intelligence Department. Ottley authored a comprehensive memorandum on 'the forcing of the Dardanelles' in August 1906.<sup>22</sup> Ottley painted a pessimistic picture for a possible enterprise by pointing out that the Ottomans had strengthened their defences in the Straits of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus. He said that even back in 1878, Admiral Geoffrey Hornby, Commander of the Mediterranean Fleet, saw great risks in forcing the Narrows where the defences were quite weak and thought that troops would be required to keep the Straits open against a determined enemy. Ottley highlighted that all the weak points of defences had been improved and transformed over years. The Turks, Ottley presented, had improved their armaments and increased the number of guns by nearly 600 per cent. The DNI's memorandum also states that 'the strength of the defences has latterly been immensely increased, not merely by the erection of new batteries, but by assiduous drill and organisation of all those minor details'. Ottley further claims with the help of 'reliable secret information' that submarine defences over which British battleships would need to traverse had been so improved that it would be madness to send ships over this area without taking precautions. He went so far as to claim that Britain would have faced another 'Khyber Pass' disaster, where most of the British forces retreating from Kabul were massacred during the First Anglo-Afghan War in 1842, had the fleet attempted to force the Straits in May 1906. The DNI, therefore, concluded that 'from the naval point of view any attempt to send the fleet to Constantinople as an operation of war against Turkey ... is greatly to be deprecated'.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Ottley seemed to be sceptical that such an enterprise would be strategically wise as the mere presence of the British fleet, without first neutralising the forts in the Straits with a military force, would have no significant impact on the Porte. He, however, appeared to have some amount of optimism, believing that an effective cooperation between the navy and the army and their frequent practices might make an operation successful.

Following a few months of silence, the CID had met again in November 1906. Opinions of military and political figures on an attack in the Dardanelles did not appear to have changed.<sup>24</sup> Fisher reiterated his previous position by hoping that no operation would be carried out in any form. Highlighting the risks involved, military members of the Committee pointed out that a military force would need to accompany the fleet and that surprise would absolutely be necessary to achieve a successful result. Director of Military Operations General John Spencer Ewart believed that landing would not be possible in the face of the opposition without surprise. Secretary of State for War, Richard Haldane, remarked that the likelihood of a reverse during the landings on the Peninsula would cause catastrophic political consequences on British prestige in the east. The CID could not once again reach a definite agreement and decided that 'no fresh conclusion should be come to until the matter had been thoroughly discussed by the Admiralty and the War Office'.<sup>25</sup>

Following the November CID meeting, the General Staff were involved in the discussions. The General Staff had drafted a memorandum just before Christmas 1906 titled 'the possibility of a joint naval and military attack upon the Dardanelles' and signed by the Chief of the General Staff, General Neville Lyttelton.<sup>26</sup> Similar to his military and political counterparts' previous assessments, Lyttelton and his staff believed an operation would be too risky. He started the analysis by arguing that any action by the fleet without the assistance of military forces should certainly be deprecated: Turkish line of communications between Europe and Asia would remain unbroken and the fleet would not be able to control the Ottoman capital, which would end up with a serious humiliation for Britain within its Muslim population. Therefore, the only viable way to get a definite result, from the Chief of the General Staff's perspective, would be a joint naval and military expedition, the aim of which was to capture the Gallipoli Peninsula and destroy the forts for the fleet. 'The first thing to be considered', for this type of operation, 'is the general one of whether a landing is possible at all in face of active opposition under modern conditions'.<sup>27</sup> Lyttelton, however, implied that the circumstances in the Dardanelles had changed over the years. He noted that the Turks strengthened their earthworks around the coastal defences. Although Turkish troops were not present in these earthworks, Lyttelton thought that it would be inconceivable to presume that the Turks would not immediately despatch their forces to the Peninsula, man all the fortifications swiftly, and construct additional earthworks dominating all suitable landing places and the forts. Despite the possibility of bringing fruitful consequences for the British, the Chief of the General Staff noted that:

It is an enterprise which might lead to the gravest military complications, the end of which no man could foresee, an enterprise full of risk and of risk which, with the tranquillity of our Indian Empire and Eastern possessions at stake, the General Staff would hesitate to accept.<sup>28</sup>

Lyttelton concluded that the General Staff, therefore, were not prepared to recommend such an enterprise being attempted. Ottley remarked on Lyttelton's memorandum, agreeing on the great risks involved in a joint naval and military operation with a minor difference from the General Staff view. While the latter considered an enterprise would be too dangerous and ineffective, the DNI, while recognising the immense risks, believed that the operation could be carried out and the success could be within the bounds of possibility, 'though at the expense, in all likelihood, of heavy sacrifice'.<sup>29</sup> In his remarks, Ottley frequently noted difficulties and possible heavy sacrifice should an enterprise be carried out. He further advised that joint naval and military manoeuvres should be practiced to facilitate the task in case an action became a necessity.

The advisability of an enterprise was discussed for the final time at the February CID meeting in 1907.<sup>30</sup> By presenting the joint memorandum of the General Staff and the Admiralty, the War Secretary believed that such an operation should not be undertaken under any circumstances in case the relations with Turkey were ruptured. Although Lord Esher proposed further investigation on the issue, this suggestion was opposed by the Foreign Secretary. Grey also said that the conclusions of the Committee should be kept secret except for the Foreign Office in order for the department to recognise Britain's limitations of power against the Ottoman Empire. At the end of the day, the Committee had concluded that

the operation of landing an expeditionary force on or near the Gallipoli Peninsula would involve great risk, and should not be undertaken if other means of bringing pressure to bear on Turkey were available.<sup>31</sup>

The Dardanelles issue was discussed at the higher echelons of Whitehall throughout most of 1906, during which the British were trying to develop an offensive strategy against Turkey. Military and political assessors agreed on the point that an enterprise aiming to force the Straits would be too risky. They had foreseen great risks because they knew how the Dardanelles defences became strong by 1906. Moreover, previous military and naval figures shared similar views underlining Ottoman modernisation efforts in the Dardanelles. Commander of the Mediterranean Fleet between 1889–1891, Sir Anthony Hoskins, informed the Admiralty that having been armed with modern armaments and submarine defences, the Dardanelles was now extremely strong. Although they were powerful against each other, modern battleships, Hoskins believed, were less suitable to compete with well-armed forts like the ones in the Dardanelles.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, the DNI in 1896 raised the point that any enterprise would be risky because the batteries of the Straits were quite strong.<sup>33</sup> In the same year, the Director of Military Intelligence, John Charles Ardagh, also revealed his opinion that the defences were furnished with modern ordnance and equipment that ‘could certainly inflict considerable damage upon the finest fleet in the world’.<sup>34</sup> The military and political assessors did not explicitly state why they thought the defences were strong. However, the fact that British intelligence had been meticulously monitoring the Dardanelles and had identified how the Ottomans had transformed and strengthened their defences since the 1880s gives us a reasonable explanation of why decision-makers’ thoughts were affected negatively.

Discussions undertaken throughout 1906 reveal another important aspect of pre-First World War British strategic planning: combined operations. Combined operations, which would be undertaken by the collaboration of the Admiralty and the War Office, were studied by some historians.<sup>35</sup> These studies largely focus on British interest in combined operations against specific powers, namely Germany and France, to capture points in Europe or their overseas possessions that would bring operational advantages to Britain. However, as this work demonstrates, British military decision-makers also studied the idea of combined operations against the Ottoman Empire. Military and naval services believed that a joint operation would be required to capture the Dardanelles forts, implying that British strategic thinking on combined operations was actually more diverse than previously thought.

## Intelligence and the Dardanelles

As shown in the previous part, the strength of the Dardanelles defences led political and military figures in Whitehall to believe that any attempt to force the Straits should be strictly condemned unless a very serious incident occurred with Turkey. This might raise the question of how they had come to the conclusion that the Turkish defences became much stronger by 1906. The answer, this paper suggests, is intelligence. Intelligence compiled about coastal and submarine defences in the Dardanelles by the War Office and the Admiralty with the help of the Foreign Office appears to have affected the decision-making in 1906. Intelligence departments had prepared regular intelligence reports demonstrating every aspect of the Dardanelles defence system, which allowed the assessors to observe how the defences had been improved and transformed.

The Great Eastern Crisis of 1875–78 was a major milestone in terms of British intelligence collection efforts on the Dardanelles. Firstly, this incident had coincided with the institutionalisation of British intelligence in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Obviously, the British were gathering information long before the 1870s. However, information collection in this period was on an *ad hoc* basis and vulnerable to getting lost in departmental records. Therefore, no significant intelligence had been systematically transmitted to later periods. With the creation of intelligence departments under the War Office and the Admiralty, this deficiency had been overcome, as these organisations began to collate and retain intelligence permanently.

The War Office was the first department that established an intelligence organisation in 1873, just before the outbreak of the Great Eastern Crisis. With the intelligence and operations staff being merged, the Intelligence Department became the Directorate of Military Operations in 1904. The DMO had different sub-sections, one of which – MO2(b) – was responsible for collating information on the Near East and the Ottoman Empire.<sup>36</sup> It was not only interested in foreign armies but also was instructed to gather information on important strong points and fortresses, such as the Dardanelles. Charles Wilson, the first chief of the Intelligence Department, advocated that the section's 'collection should consist of ... the best plans of foreign fortresses ... [and] photographs of the colonies and foreign countries'.<sup>37</sup>

The Admiralty also established its own intelligence department in the same period. Despite having received information for decades, there was no attempt to establish a body to systematise information collection within the Admiralty. The Great Eastern Crisis triggered a discussion over the need for an organisation for this purpose.<sup>38</sup> Following the suggestion of the Carnarvon Commission, a tiny Foreign Intelligence Committee was established within the Admiralty in 1882, which was in 1887 replaced with the Naval Intelligence Department (NID).<sup>39</sup> The foundation of naval intelligence did not initiate information gathering in the Admiralty for the first time. What the NID ensured was the systematic collation of information that was already flowing in from different sources. This branch allowed new information that might affect Britain's naval strategy to be better understood and evaluated.<sup>40</sup> Although the main concern of the Admiralty's intelligence department was the naval forces of other great powers, it did not exclude other maritime issues that might be useful for a possible naval operation, such as information regarding coastal defences. Admiralty files indicate that the NID was instructed to gather information about coastal defences, similar to those in the Dardanelles.<sup>41</sup> The NID's responsibilities remained unchanged for the most of the next three decades.

In addition to the institutionalisation of British intelligence, the Great Eastern Crisis was another contributing factor to British intelligence gathering efforts because of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78, which was the climax of this crisis. The humiliating defeat by Russia made one point clear to the Ottomans, namely that their capital was more vulnerable to assault from sea as well as land. Developments after the crisis aggravated the Ottomans' concerns over the Straits. The Porte was receiving intelligence about preparations for a Russian *coup de main* against its capital, which coincided with Sultan's fears that the Great Game between Russia and Britain could escalate a crisis over the Straits.<sup>42</sup> Also, as one Ottoman inspector highlighted, most of the Dardanelles coastal defences were outdated and unable to compete with modern navies.<sup>43</sup> In these circumstances, the Sultan ordered the strengthening and modernising the defences. Ottoman modernisation efforts did not go unnoticed by the British intelligence, as the following section will show. The modernisation attempts unsurprisingly further attracted British attention. The DNI rightly stated in his memorandum that the Turks had created a committee to reorganise their defences in the Dardanelles.<sup>44</sup> Turkish sources confirm the foundation of this committee, which was responsible for the improvement of mines, torpedoes, and coastal defences.<sup>45</sup> Coinciding with the foundation of naval and military intelligence departments, the Dardanelles defence system had been improved extensively since the 1880s. These efforts and defences were meticulously monitored by the British.

Intelligence departments exploited various sources to gather information. Not surprisingly for the period, human sources were the linchpin of this task. Also, the vast majority of information sources were qualified as non-covert.<sup>46</sup> This appears to be correct for the case of the Dardanelles, including military intelligence sources. Most of the information came from well-established Foreign Office diplomatic services within the Empire. Vice-consuls at the Dardanelles and Gallipoli furnished London with the most reliable information since they were able to report all military developments promptly. William Reginald Hall, wartime DNI, had later stated as a witness in the Dardanelles Commission in 1916 that the consul in the Dardanelles was always 'likely to hear quickly any rumours of changes in the defences'.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, Foreign Office records demonstrate how frequently consuls sent reports to London.<sup>48</sup> Military and naval attachés were also quite useful in gathering

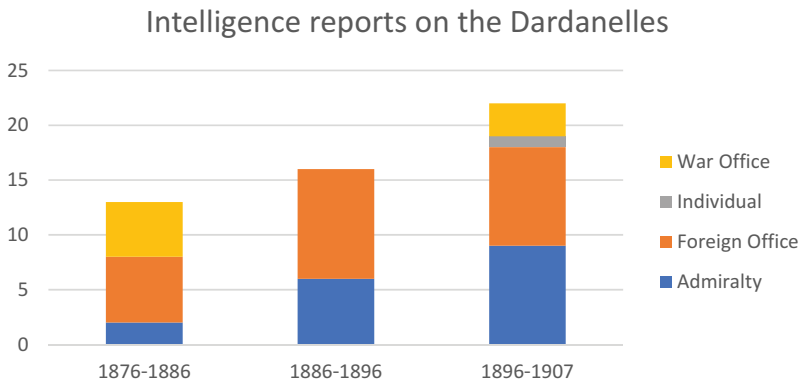


information because of their military background and technical expertise. The potential value of military attachés in information-gathering was grasped during the foundation of the military and naval intelligence departments.<sup>49</sup> The first military attaché was appointed to the British embassy at Constantinople in 1876.<sup>50</sup> In order to supervise the conditions of the Treaty of Berlin following the Russo-Turkish War, the British government appointed military consuls in Anatolia whose secondary missions were to gather information.<sup>51</sup> Those officers were able to visit the Dardanelles frequently, reporting their observations and thus contributing to various intelligence reports. Some of them, such as the former military attaché Herbert Chermiside, supported their reports with photographs of the Turkish defences.<sup>52</sup> The valuable work of attachés and officers was acknowledged by Captain 'Blinker' Hall in his statement to the Dardanelles commissioners after the Campaign in 1915:

These ... sources are by far the most valuable, as the information obtained from them emanates from observers with technical knowledge ... In the particular case of the Dardanelles, circumstances are more than usually favourable for obtaining reliable information. The defences in question are not far from Constantinople, the headquarters of the naval attachés, and it is constantly a comparatively easy matter for him to inspect periodically from seaward.<sup>53</sup>

In addition to officially appointed personnel, intelligence departments exploited other officers to compile information as well, though the value of their contribution to intelligence reports was not entirely known. Some British officers were able to penetrate the heart of the Peninsula and make clandestine observations, such as Captain Charles Woods who volunteered to reconnoitre the Dardanelles defences in late 1906 and reported his observations to the Admiralty.<sup>54</sup> Officers had usually used the most common and secure way, which was making observations while passing inside the Dardanelles by ship for leisure or an official visit. Some prominent figures such as Charles Edward Callwell (intelligence officer and wartime DMO), Maurice Hankey (intelligence officer and later Secretary to the CID), George Aston (intelligence officer attached to the NID and the Mediterranean Fleet), Fisher, and many others passed through the Dardanelles in this way and shared their observations with the departments.<sup>55</sup> These figures were directly involved in decision-making through CID or the intelligence departments. For instance, Hankey was attached to the NID as a coastal defence analyst before he became the Assistant Secretary to the CID in 1908. Some of them even used this chance to take photographs of the Dardanelles defences and handed them over to London.<sup>56</sup> Informants were also used to collect information. Given that the Empire consisted of different religious and ethnic groups whose attitude was largely antagonistic to the Ottoman administration, 'reliable agents, provided good means of communication exist, are not so very difficult to obtain in Turkey'.<sup>57</sup> As some intelligence reports pointed out, there was a considerable Greek population living on the Peninsula.<sup>58</sup> This is why the last British military attaché before the declaration of hostilities in 1914 stated that information derived from the Greeks 'was of the best'.<sup>59</sup>

We can measure how successful intelligence departments were in compiling information on the Dardanelles in the previous three decades before the Taba affair. The War Office and the Admiralty had prepared regular intelligence reports about the Straits since the late 1870s. The Foreign Office also supported other Whitehall departments' assessments with correspondences containing information. As [Figure 1](#) shows, intelligence reports about the Dardanelles produced by different departments in London had increased over three decades from 1876. By the time that the CID reached a conclusion in 1907, more than 50 intelligence reports or correspondences had been compiled and were available to Whitehall departments. Intelligence reports had seen more increase between 1896 and 1907. The main reason behind this was probably the combined threats of the Franco-Russian alliance and a potential threat of Russian *coup de main* against Constantinople during the late 1890s. The British had authored more assessments and thus produced more intelligence content covering the Turkish Straits in the likelihood of a conflict with Russia or the Dual Alliance. All the reports were not unique. Some of them were a mere update of the previous report. Therefore, in terms of quantity, military and political decision-makers had satisfactory evidence by 1906 showing the improvements in the Dardanelles defences.



**Figure 1.** Intelligence reports on the Dardanelles.<sup>60</sup>

Intelligence reports made one point clear: the British had monitored and recorded every aspect of the Dardanelles defence system and thus were aware of the Turkish modernisation efforts. In addition to the defences, the reports had assessments on the terrain of the Gallipoli Peninsula and the Asiatic side of the Straits. If one component of this system was considered on its own, the defences might seem ineffective or easy to put out of action. However, the real value could only be understood by taking all of the components together into consideration, as it proved in 1915. The departments tried to compile information about all the aspects of the defences. Intelligence reports suggest that they were actually successful in doing this.

One of the most discernible components of the Dardanelles defence system were the forts located at both shores of the Straits from its entrance to the upper mouth in northeast. Those forts were designed to stop adversary fleets and protect the submarine defences as much as possible. Some of the forts dated back to the fifteenth century, namely *Kale-i Sultaniye* (Fortress of Sultan) and *Kilidbahir*, which were built at the narrowest part of the Dardanelles. The naval intelligence was expecting that 'the main opposition would come from the guns of the forts' at the Narrows.<sup>61</sup> During the reorganisation attempts in the 1880s, the Ottomans had built additional forts, which were identified and reported by the British.<sup>62</sup> There were in total more than 35 forts. All of these forts were identified in the intelligence reports and clearly marked on the provided maps.<sup>63</sup> The reports grouped the fortifications into three categories: those at the entrance, at the Narrows, and at the north of the town of Midos. Because of their proximity to each other, the ones located in the central section, or the Narrows were considered the most important forts, consisting of guns of the largest calibre.<sup>64</sup> Intelligence records detailed almost every aspect of the forts, including their comprehensive physical descriptions, armaments (types and conditions of guns), and Ottoman garrisons inside them.<sup>65</sup> Improvements in the coastal fortifications were also captured by the intelligence departments. Although initial reports written in the early 1880s stated that there were some significant deficiencies in the forts, all of these were reported to have been remedied.<sup>66</sup> As part of the modernisation efforts, the Ottomans had decided to replace the batteries and ordnance in their forts with a more definite system and ordered new guns from Krupp.<sup>67</sup> The NID seems to have received information about this order by utilising open-source intelligence, not only the news of the order but also information on the number and types of guns ordered, and their date of arrival and distribution plans.<sup>68</sup>

Submarine defences were another important component of the Dardanelles defence system. The Admiralty had already given special interest to submarine weaponry technology by the 1890s and had tried to develop offensive and defensive countermeasures against it.<sup>69</sup> Similar to the forts, naval intelligence reports in particular collated detailed information about the submarine

defences that the Ottomans had placed inside the Straits.<sup>70</sup> The Dardanelles defences were rightly believed to have had three different minefields: one at the entrance of the Straits, one at the Narrows, and another between the former and the latter. The Ottomans, intelligence reports pointed out, had laid around 80 mines into those fields and gave special importance to the field at the Narrows. The reports described the depth and distance between each mine and minefield. Firing stations and their conditions were mentioned in the reports, along with the location of each station marked on the charts. As part of the submarine defences, the Ottomans placed 'booms' in the vicinity of the Narrows, which were designed to force ships to reduce their speed and thus ensure that they remained under constant fire. All of these submarine defences, furthermore, were protected with coastal defences. Also, the attempt of the Ottomans to buy modern submarine defences such as electro-contact and mechanical mines or 'locomotive' torpedoes was also monitored by the British intelligence, though their outcome was not entirely known by 1906.<sup>71</sup> Although the early intelligence reports suggested that the Ottoman mine system was still defective and would not be enough to prevent battleships from passing the Straits, the experience of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904–05 appears to have changed the British perception on this point. This war showed the British how effective mines could be against battleships. During the war, all of the Japanese capital ship losses occurred because of mines.<sup>72</sup> While the war was continuing in the Far East, Ottley specifically called attention to this point by saying in his memorandum that

while scarcely a single large vessel has been sent to the bottom by gunfire or by Whitehead torpedoes, no less than three battleships and six cruisers ... have been totally lost due to striking automatic mines<sup>73</sup>

This point clearly highlighted that the Admiralty was very well aware of the potential risks of mines and changed the colour of optimistic views in the previous intelligence reports to a more pessimistic tone.

Intelligence departments were also interested in the land defences, the terrain, and suitable landing places on and around the Gallipoli Peninsula. The main driving force for collecting this kind of information was the expectation of a military operation to neutralise the forts from the rear. As the major theatre of operations was expected to be the European side of the Straits, most of the reports dealt with defences on the Gallipoli Peninsula.<sup>74</sup> The *Kilidbahir* plateau on the European side, which commanded the forts at the Narrows and would be the main objective of General Ian Hamilton in 1915, was considered to be a 'key' point. According to a naval intelligence report, 'the seizure of this hill would therefore be the first objective of a land force'.<sup>75</sup> 'If this plateau could be occupied by a hostile force', another military intelligence report of a later period states, 'the principal defences could be rendered untenable, and the Straits opened to a fleet which has got through the outer line of works'.<sup>76</sup> There were detailed descriptions of the terrain as well. It was mentioned that the Peninsula had areas of high ground, which were surrounded by deep ravines and watercourses and became impassable during winter owing to bad weather and insufficient road structure, thus implying these areas to be unsuitable for a major operation.<sup>77</sup> The Ottoman garrisons that occupied the land defences of the Peninsula were detailed with their numbers, stations, equipment, and readiness.<sup>78</sup> It was stated that most of the Dardanelles forts were nearly fully garrisoned and could easily be reinforced at short notice. The gunners at the forts and land defences were reported to be exercised very frequently. Also, the reports gave a special interest to the Ottoman defences in the Bolair Lines. These lines were intended to prevent the forts on the Peninsula being surrounded from northeast and were thus protected with a series of strong fortifications. All suitable landing places, according to the reports, were on the European shores in terms of achieving the objective of capturing the forts. Two places in particular were identified as the most suitable locations to land troops as they offered considerably wider beaches: the one between *Kaba Tepe* and *Suvla* Bay and the ones in Cape Helles and Cape Tekke where the allied

forces in 1915 would land.<sup>79</sup> Despite being seen as suitable, military and naval assessors in 1906 highlighted in their assessments that a landing operation might be difficult and risky if the shores were defended by the Ottomans.

## Conclusion

This paper aims to consider assessments on the advisability of an operation in the Dardanelles produced by different Whitehall departments throughout 1906. As explained, the assessments were of a pessimistic nature, underlining that an operation was not advisable as it would be too risky. This paper suggests that the majority of military and political assessors in 1906 thought this way because they were well-acquainted with the Dardanelles defence system, which had been improved by the Ottomans since the Great Eastern Crisis. Military and naval intelligence departments had compiled detailed intelligence. As such, by the time the Dardanelles issue began to be discussed following the incident in 1906, members of the fighting departments and the CID had well-established knowledge on how the Turks organised their defences.

Intelligence collection and assessments on the Dardanelles did not stop with the final conclusion of the CID on the issue in February 1907. The departments continued to gather information on the defences until the outbreak of war in 1914.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, the Dardanelles became important again during different Near Eastern crises. Throughout the Turco-Italian War in 1911 and the Balkan Wars of 1912–13, the Ottomans strengthened the defences by increasing their troops and laying additional mines in the Straits over the potential threats of adversaries' fleets. Those developments were meticulously monitored by the British services.<sup>81</sup> Therefore, by the time the War Council met to discuss the naval operation to force the Dardanelles in January 1915, a significant amount of intelligence on the Turkish defences had already been accumulated, most of which had been collected before 1906. More importantly, some important figures who were involved in the assessments in the aftermath of Taba, such as Fisher and Grey, were among the members of the War Council in 1915. Although the question of why the decision-makers ignored pre-war intelligence and assessments in 1915 is beyond the scope of this paper, it would be no exaggeration to suggest that the intelligence reports and assessments produced before 1914 were not too old to be completely forgotten.

This study contributes to different research fields. Regular intelligence reports of the War Office and the Admiralty demonstrate how important and comprehensive intelligence collection was prior to the war's outbreak in 1914. Some authors have already pointed out this argument by showing the success of pre-1914 British intelligence collection with different cases, such as Matthew Seligmann's seminal works.<sup>82</sup> As Seligmann emphasised, some works argued that there was a failure in pre-First World War British intelligence due to the lack of systematic information collection.<sup>83</sup> This article, while supporting Seligmann's point, provides another good case study, demonstrating how intelligence gathering was successful and that the arguments of the above-mentioned authors are not entirely true. Also, existing literature on pre-war British intelligence predominantly focuses on information collection on foreign navies of some powers, namely France, Russia, and later Germany. Considering the threat perception of the era, this is quite understandable. However, this does not mean that the Admiralty was not interested in other maritime issues and countries. By focusing on the Dardanelles and the Ottoman Empire, this article posits that the Admiralty and the War Office were actually in receipt of information on coastal defences of significant locations that might affect Britain's naval supremacy meaning that British intelligence collection was more widespread than had been assumed.

This work is also important as it implies that the intelligence and decision-making relation did not start with the establishment of the JIC in the interwar period. Although the JIC was a major milestone in making the intelligence machinery more professional for Whitehall decision-makers, military and naval intelligence seems to have already impacted upon decision-making before 1936. Intelligence collected during the three decades before the Taba affair led political and military assessors to believe that attacking the Dardanelles would be too costly and thus changed a potential course of

action. Therefore, it cannot be claimed that pre-war intelligence did not impact decision-makers. Obviously, the use of intelligence would have a long way to go before it was utilised in a much more professional sense.

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