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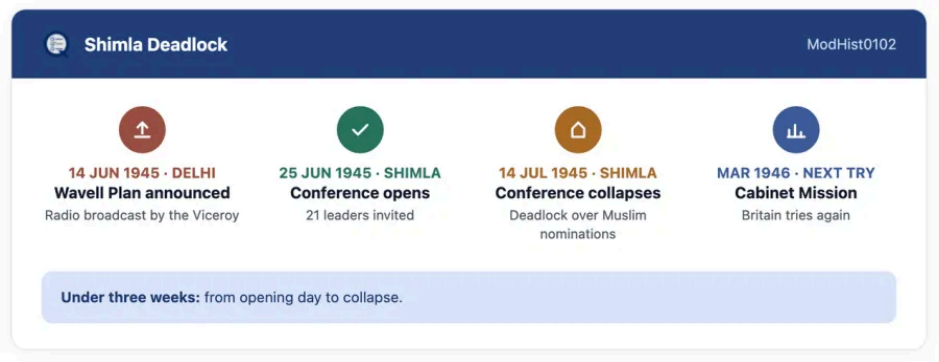
In June 1945, a wartime Viceroy tried to break India's political deadlock. One demand from the Muslim League ended his plan within three weeks.

This lesson covers the Wavell Plan, the Shimla Conference, and why its failure matters for Partition.



Field Marshal Lord Wavell, Viceroy of India, at his desk, 1943, two years before he announced the Wavell Plan. Photo: Imperial War Museums (No. TR 841), public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.



The Shimla Conference lasted under three weeks. Its failure shaped every later plan.

Oct 1943. Lord Wavell becomes Viceroy, succeeding Lord Linlithgow.
14 Jun 1945. Wavell announces his plan by radio from Delhi.
25 Jun 1945. The Shimla Conference opens with 21 invited leaders.
14 Jul 1945. Wavell ends the conference. There is no agreement.
1945-46. The Muslim League wins the elections for Muslim seats.
Mar 1946. The Cabinet Mission arrives from Britain.

Parity: equal seats for Caste Hindus and Muslims, whatever their share of the population.

Executive Council: the Viceroy's council, which acted like a cabinet for British India.

Veto: the power to block a decision.

1 What was the Wavell Plan?

Wavell wanted to break the wartime deadlock with a new Executive Council.

- Lord Wavell had taken over as Viceroy in **October 1943**.
- He succeeded Lord Linlithgow.
- On **14 June 1945**, he announced his plan in a radio broadcast from Delhi.
- The aim was to break India's wartime political deadlock.
- It was also a real step towards self-government.
- The plan proposed reconstituting the **Viceroy's Executive Council**.
- Every member except the Viceroy and the Commander-in-Chief would be Indian. That was a first.
- The Council would give equal seats to Caste Hindus and Muslims. This was called **parity**.
- Parity gave Muslims far more seats than their share of the population. That was deliberate.
- The Executive Council would also take over more portfolios, such as external affairs, in Indian hands.
- Wavell had travelled to London earlier in 1945 to win approval for the plan from the British government.
- The Viceroy would still remain above the Council. This was a step towards self-government, not independence.

2 Who was invited to Shimla?

Wavell invited 21 leaders. Congress leaders came out of jail first.

- The **Shimla Conference** opened on 25 June 1945.
- Wavell invited **21 Indian political leaders**.
- They included Gandhi and Muhammad Ali Jinnah.
- Members of the Congress Working Committee were released from jail in June 1945. They had been jailed since the Quit India

Movement of 1942.

- Churchill's government had authorised Wavell to open talks.
- The talks took place at the Viceregal Lodge in the hill town of Shimla, then the summer capital.
- The 21 invitees were party leaders, provincial premiers and community representatives.
- Congress sent Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, its own Muslim president, to lead its side.
- Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the Frontier Congress leader, also attended.
- For the earlier political demands behind these talks, see Indian Councils Act, 1909 (Morley-Minto Reforms).

Quick check 1. The Wavell Plan proposed equal Council seats for Caste Hindus and Muslims. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

3 Why did the conference collapse?

The Muslim League wanted to pick every Muslim member.

- The League demanded the **sole right to nominate every Muslim member**.
- Congress rejected this. It wanted to nominate its own Muslim members too.
- That is why Congress had sent Maulana Azad, its own Muslim president.
- Jinnah also demanded a Muslim **veto**.
- Under it, decisions opposed by Muslim members could be blocked.
- The League feared that Sikh, Christian and Depressed Classes members would side with Congress.
- That would leave the League a permanent minority on the Council.
- Jinnah also refused to accept any Muslim who was not a League nominee. This included Muslim leaders of other parties, such as the Unionist Party of Punjab.
- Neither side would budge.
- Wavell ended the conference on **14 July 1945**. He named the League's demands as the cause.
- The conference had lasted under three weeks.

4 What happened after the collapse?

The failure helped the League more than anyone.

- Jinnah's position grew stronger after Shimla.
- The League claimed to be the sole voice of India's Muslims. Shimla showed that claim had become a real veto point.

- In the **1945-46 elections**, the League won nearly all the reserved Muslim seats in the central assembly.
- It also won most Muslim seats in the provinces.
- Gandhi's earlier direct talks with Jinnah, held in Bombay in September 1944, had also failed to reach agreement.
- In July 1945, a Labour government also replaced Churchill's in Britain. It sent a new mission in March 1946.
- Two attempts at agreement had now failed. Positions on both sides hardened.

5 Why is Shimla a hinge event?

Every later plan reacted to this failure.

- Historians treat the Shimla failure as a watershed.
- It set the stage for the 1946 Cabinet Mission Plan.
- The Cabinet Mission had three British members: Pethick-Lawrence, Cripps and A.V. Alexander.
- Communal tensions fed into the League's 1946 Direct Action Day, called for 16 August 1946.
- The violence that followed made compromise harder still.
- The endgame came with the Mountbatten Plan.
- Then came the Indian Independence Act, 1947.
- Both grew more drastic partly because Shimla had shown that compromise was hard.
- In exams, treat Shimla as a hinge event, not an isolated failed conference.

Quick check 2. Congress agreed to let the Muslim League nominate all Muslim members of the Council. *(True or False?)*

See answer ↓

Remember: Wavell Viceroy, Oct 1943. Plan, 14 Jun 1945. Shimla, 25 Jun to 14 Jul 1945. 21 leaders. Parity for Caste Hindus and Muslims. League wanted sole nomination of Muslim members, plus a veto. Next: Cabinet Mission 1946.

Think it through: Why could Congress not accept the League's nomination demand?

Congress claimed to represent all Indians, Muslims included. It had a Muslim president, Maulana Azad, at the talks. Accepting the League's demand would have meant admitting that only the League spoke for Muslims.

Quick check 3. The League won nearly all reserved Muslim seats in the central assembly in 1945-46. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Practice MCQs

1. Who announced the Wavell Plan in June 1945?

A. Lord Mountbatten

B. Lord Linlithgow

C. Lord Wavell

D. Lord Curzon

See answer ↓

2. What did the Wavell Plan propose for the Viceroy's Executive Council?

A. Replacing it with a directly elected parliament

B. Abolishing it entirely

C. Handing full control to the Muslim League alone

D. Reconstituting it with equal Hindu-Muslim representation, all members Indian except the Viceroy and Commander-in-Chief

See answer ↓

3. Where and when was the conference to discuss the Wavell Plan held?

A. Delhi, in August 1945

B. Lahore, in March 1945

C. Simla, from 14 June to 25 June 1945

D. Shimla, from 25 June to 14 July 1945

See answer ↓

4. Besides sole nomination rights, what additional demand did Jinnah make at the Shimla Conference?

A. That the Viceroy chair every Council meeting in person

B. A communal veto: decisions opposed by two-thirds of Muslim members would be blocked

C. That the Council include an equal number of British members

D. That provincial elections be postponed until after the war

See answer ↓

5. The Wavell Plan of 1945, proposed by Viceroy Lord Wavell as an attempt to break the political deadlock following the Second World War, specifically proposed which arrangement?

A. Reconstituting the Viceroy's Executive Council with Indian members, including equal representation for Congress and Muslim League caste-Hindu and Muslim nominees

B. Immediate complete independence

C. Formal Partition into India and Pakistan

D. Abolition of all provincial legislatures

See answer ↓

6. Gandhi's direct talks with Muhammad Ali Jinnah in September 1944, held over several days in Bombay and centred on the C.R. Formula's proposed framework, ultimately?

A. Resulted in an immediate merger of the Congress and Muslim League

B. Led directly to the Cabinet Mission's later, different proposals

C. Successfully resolved the Pakistan demand entirely

D. Failed to reach agreement, with Jinnah rejecting the formula as insufficient

See answer ↓

7. The 1946 Cabinet Mission Plan, sent by the postwar British Labour government to negotiate India's constitutional future, notably envisioned which structural arrangement for a united India?

A. A fully unitary centralised state

B. Continuation of princely-state paramountcy indefinitely

C. Complete partition into two separate dominions

D. A loose three-tier federation with grouped provinces and significant provincial autonomy

See answer ↓

8. What event did the Muslim League call for on 16 August 1946, after withdrawing from the Cabinet Mission Plan?

A. Quit India Movement

B. Direct Action Day

C. Non-Cooperation Movement

D. Civil Disobedience Movement

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.** Viceroy Lord Wavell announced the plan on 14 June 1945, to break India's wartime political deadlock. ↑ Q1
2. **D.** The plan proposed equal Hindu-Muslim representation on a reconstituted Council, with every member Indian except the Viceroy and Commander-in-Chief. ↑ Q2
3. **D.** The Shimla Conference ran from 25 June to 14 July 1945, attended by 21 Indian political leaders including Gandhi and Jinnah. ↑ Q3
4. **B.** Jinnah wanted a Muslim League veto: any decision opposed by two-thirds of the Council's Muslim members would need to be blocked. Combined with his sole-nomination demand, this would have given the League an effective lock on Muslim-related decisions. ↑ Q4
5. **A.** Wavell's plan proposed reconstituting his Executive Council with Indian members drawn in equal numbers from Congress-nominated caste-Hindus and Muslim League-nominated Muslims (alongside other minority representation), intended as an interim step toward eventual self-government while the deeper constitutional questions remained unresolved. The proposal was discussed at the subsequent Shimla Conference in 1945, but ultimately collapsed over the Muslim League's insistence on being the sole legitimate representative of all Muslims (including nominating any Muslim members), a demand the Congress -- which itself included prominent Muslim members like Maulana Azad -- refused to accept. The Wavell Plan's failure at Shimla set the stage for the subsequent 1945-46 provincial and central elections, which would themselves further clarify and harden the respective political mandates of Congress and the Muslim League going into the final independence negotiations. ↑ Q5

6. **D.** The extended Gandhi-Jinnah talks, despite generating considerable public attention and cautious hope for a negotiated settlement, ultimately broke down over Jinnah's insistence that Pakistan's sovereignty be unconditionally accepted as a precondition for any further discussion, a position significantly more absolute than the more negotiated, plebiscite-conditional approach the C.R. Formula had proposed. This 1944 failure, occurring roughly midway between the earlier Cripps Mission's collapse and the subsequent 1946 Cabinet Mission negotiations, illustrates the consistent, recurring pattern of failed compromise attempts characterising nearly the entire final decade of pre-independence constitutional negotiation. The talks' failure further entrenched the increasingly hardened positions on both sides that would make the eventual 1947 Partition seem, in retrospect, an almost inevitable outcome of this cumulative multi-year negotiation breakdown pattern. ↑ Q6
7. **D.** The Cabinet Mission, comprising Pethick-Lawrence, Stafford Cripps and A.V. Alexander, proposed a complex federal structure grouping India's provinces into three sections along broadly religious-demographic lines while preserving a unified Indian union with limited central powers, an arrangement intended to accommodate Muslim League concerns about Hindu-majority domination without resorting to full Partition. The Muslim League initially accepted the plan on 6th June 1946, having understood it as implicitly conceding their core demands, but subsequent disagreements over interim government formation and interpretation of the provincial grouping scheme caused the delicate compromise to unravel. The plan's ultimate failure to hold this middle path together is often cited by historians as the last realistic opportunity to avoid the wrenching Partition that followed roughly a year later. ↑ Q7
8. **B.** The Muslim League withdrew its acceptance of the Cabinet Mission Plan on 29 July 1946. It then called for 'Direct Action' on 16 August 1946, which led to severe communal riots, especially in Calcutta. ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** ↑ 1
2. **False.** ↑ 2
3. **True.** ↑ 3

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