Brief prepared by the Joint Planning Staff for proposed talks in Washington on the subject of the Middle East, 26 September 1947

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CHIEFS OF STAFF COMMITTEE

Joint Planning Staff

MIDDLE EAST — BRIEF FOR DISCUSSIONS

Report by the Joint Planning Staff

As instructed, we have prepared a brief for the Representatives of the Chiefs of Staff at the proposed talks in Washington on the subject of the Middle East. In preparing this brief we have taken account of a letter from the Foreign Office which sets out the scope and object of these talks.

[…]

5. The area in which Russian expansion would be easiest and at the same time would hurt us most would be the Middle East. We may be sure that if we abandon our position there in peace Russia will fill the vacuum.

6. Our experience in other areas such as Eastern Europe has shown that when Russia gains control our economic interests are forfeited and our communications are cut. The first impact of Russian expansion into the Middle East would therefore be upon our oil supplies and upon Commonwealth sea and air communications. The importance to us of present and potential oil supplies in the area is as great, if not greater, than ever, particularly in peace. The importance of the Middle East as a centre of Commonwealth communications remains, and will remain beyond question.

If the use of the Middle East communications was denied to us it would be necessary to divert our supplies round the Cape or across Central Africa, which would increase immeasurably the burden of our resources. Moreover, our strategic signal communications would be disrupted.

7. The powerful position which Russia would acquire by linking the Middle East countries to her influence and economy would prepare the way for further infiltration into both Asia and Africa. If Russia were to establish herself in the Middle East in peace or war, her power and influence would dominate the Moslem world and would be likely to spread eastwards through India. Burma and Malaya; southwards through the Sudan; and westwards in North Africa.

8. In all these areas cells of communism exist, but so far in isolation. Once Russian were established in the Middle East she would create from these isolated cells a comprehensive and unified organisation. This would seriously undermine our strategy and economic interests in all these areas. Her eastward expansion would threaten the security of India, our control of sea communications in the Indian Ocean and our resources of oil, tin and rubber. Her westward expansion would create a new threat to our Atlantic sea communications already likely to be gravely endangered.

9. Moreover, by ejecting the influence of the Western Powers from the Middle East, Russia would be securing her most vulnerable flank[[1]](#footnote-1). It is from the Middle East area that her own vital oil industry and new industrial centers can most effectively be threatened. At the same time we should be placed in the position of having to be prepared to meet direct attacks on our own territories and interests in Africa, Aden, the Mediterranean and India and on our communications in the Indian Ocean.

10. To sum up, if Russia secured control of this area not only would we lose very important resources and facilities but she would acquire a position of such dominating strategic and economic power that it would be fatal to our security. It is therefore vital that we must retain a firm hold on the Middle East. This can only be achieved by our physical presence there in peace and by tangible evidence of our intention to remain.

An important contribution the security of our position will be the continued independence of Greece and Turkey.

11. The need to retain our strategic and economic position in the Middle East is of equal importance if we should be engaged in war with a Power other than Russia. This is demonstrated by the fact that in two world wars we have had to defeat Germany in the Middle East.

12. The advent of mass destruction weapons and other new means of offense has greatly increased the vulnerability of the United Kingdom with her dense and concentrated population and industries. We do not think that it will be possible by purely defensive action to prevent the delivery of all weapons of mass destruction, and the effect of even a small number will be proportionately greater in the United Kingdom than in a larger country with a widely dispersed industry.

13. In spite of our industrial and technical lead and in spite of the assistance of allies, including America, we should be unable to prevent the vastly superior land forces of Russia overrunning North-West Europe. From this position rockets and other long-range missiles might, if the build-up cannot be impeded, cause irreparable damage or even the elimination of the United Kingdom, even without recourse to atom attack. It is essential that before such destruction — from which we might never recover — could be achieved, we ourselvess should assume the initiative and destroy the enemy’s means of making war. The vulnerability of this country to modern weapons would bring the war to its climax much earlier than in the past. This initiative must be assumed from the outset. This entails not only the readiness of offensive forces, but the presence in this country of the essential resources to maintain them at intensive rates immediately on the outbreak of war.

14. If we are to impede the enemy build-up in Western Europe and to strike at the enemy’s means of making war, we must possess air forces capable of penetrating into enemy territory and offensive bases from which they can operate. Apart from the United Kingdom, the Middle East is an essential offensive base from which it is possible to reach many vital areas of Russia which cannot effectively be dealt with by forces based in the United Kingdom. In particular, it is by far the best base for attack on Russia’s oil production, one of the weak points in Russia’s war potential.

*Defence of the Middle East*

15. The main problem of the defense of this area is the time factor and the effect of present political changes upon our position at the outbreak of war.

The vital strategic area of the Middle East is Egypt, since it possesses the essential air bases, ports, communications and man-power. Our defensive preparations therefore must be directed primarily to the retention of that area.

We cannot be certain of being able to defend our oil resources in the Middle East, but we must make every effort to do so. It should be our combined aim to ensure that oil pipe-lines and other oil communications are as well placed strategically as possible. We should also endeavour, by all the means in our power, to develop sources of supply in less vulnerable areas in the Middle East and elsewhere, and to build up our oil reserves particularly by stockpiling in the United Kingdom and other main base areas.

16. The Defence of Egypt against a land attack from the north must be conducted in the area Southern Syria-Northern Palestine. The land forces which the Russians can deploy in this area would be operating at the end of long and difficult lines of communications, and would be reduced by maintenance difficulties. They would be further hampered if we were able to take early air action against their communications, from bases in the Middle East. A further advantage our Land Forces would enjoy would be the support of Naval Forces operating to their seaward flank. Provided we are established in the Middle East area before a Russian advance, and provided early reinforcements can be obtained from the Dominions and the United States it should be possible to defend our interests in the Middle East. The expenditure of resources required to recapture our position in the Middle East, if it is lost through our inability to concentrate there in time, will be out of all proportion to the expenditure needed to defend it if we are firmly established at the outbreak.

17. The problem is primarily one of time, *i.e.* whether we can get the necessary forces into position before the Russians can attack in strength. If the necessary arrangements are made for rapid assistance from the United States and the Dominions, we consider that an effective defense is well within our capacity, provided that: —

1. We have retained the co-operation of the Arab states— a cardinal point in our policy
2. We have the necessary strategic rights to allow our timely re-entry into those areas which are vital to the defense of Middle East and the maintenance of facilities there. This could be achieved by conclusion of a Treaty with Egypt and retention of rights in Palestine. As these are doubtful the control of Cyrenaica is essential.
3. We retain the sovereignty of Cyprus.
4. Turkey refuses Russian demands for strategic facilities in peace and opposes Russian invasion of her territory. This will modify the time factor to our advantage. The continued independence of Greece will greatly encourage the Turks to stiffen their attitude.

East Africa has been approved as a store holding area; it would also be a useful location for reserves. The establishment in East Africa of a base as an alternative to the Middle East is ruled out owing to the time and space factor. The establishment of this store holding area in East Africa in no way indicates a change in our strategic policy in the Middle East.

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1. This refers to the oilfields in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, which, at the time produced the majority of the oil in the USSR. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)