Note by the Foreign Office on the political and economic bases of British policy in the Middle East, 24 January 1947

In view of the changes which have taken place since the end of the war, it may be useful to summarise the reasons for our present policy in the Middle East. The strategical reasons for maintaining our position in that area have been dealt with in a number of papers by the Chiefs of Staff, and this memorandum deals principally with the political and economic bases of our policy.

3. An essential assumption for all this is that we should play the main part in co-ordinating the defence of the area and should take the lead in any United Nations regional defence scheme for the Middle East that might be set up. This could and should be done with the minimum manpower from the United Kingdom. If agreement can be reached on the Treaties with Egypt and Iraq and if a solution of the Palestine problem can be found, very little British manpower need be involved. Local manpower properly trained, especially in the air, should be able with our advice and assistance assure the security of the Middle East in peacetime.

4. A number of arguments have been advanced against this policy. It has been suggested that our position in the Middle East, though actually defensive in character, might seem to the Soviet Union to be the preparation for an offensive. Furthermore, it is claimed that the countries in the area are too weak to be able to stand up to Russia, and that their internal regimes are in any case reactionary and corrupt. It has therefore been suggested that the proper course would be to reach an agreement with the Soviet Government whereby the Middle East would become a neutral area in which neither side would exert a predominant influence. The following paragraphs seek to answer these arguments.

5. It is not necessarily the case that the Russians will interpret our presence in the Middle East as a preparation for an offensive against themselves. We have been there for a long time, long before we could be supposed to have any such intention. Furthermore, the Russians can see that we are withdrawing our troops from Egypt and reducing our strength throughout the areas. But even if they do deduce from our presence in the Middle East that we regard as a base for action against them, there is no reason for us to confirm by our withdrawal that we shall never be in a position to mount a counter-offensive against them if they do attack us. Nor would it reduce the chance of their attacking us if we gave them this confirmation, since even if by reducing ourselves to impotence, we convinced the Russians of our pacific intentions, they would still remain suspicious of American plans to use the United Kingdom as a base in a war against Russia.

6. It is furthermore a dangerous argument to say that we must drop any policy that might seem to the Russians a preparation for an offensive. It could be applied to any attempt by us to make a friend anywhere…

[…]

9. The proposal to negotiate a self-denying ordinance with the Soviet Government on this area rests on the assumption that it is possible to convince the present rulers of Russia that we have no offensive intentions against her, and that they, for their part, would be likely to agree to abide by an arrangement of this kind without seeking to move in and fill the vacuum which we should leave.

10. This assumption does not appear to be valid. The Soviet leaders are committed to the belief that there is a natural conflict between the capitalist and communist world. They also believe that they have a mission to work for a communist world. Consequently, if a vacuum is left in the Middle East, particularly in the circumstances of dislocation which such a change of policy would produce, circumstance particularly favourably to the spread of Communism, Soviet infiltration would be inevitable.

11. The result of attempting such a negotiation would be to repeat on a larger scale the errors made at Munich, with Greece, Turkey and Persia as the first victims in place of Czechoslovakia. Whatever opinion may be held of the internal regimes of the Middle East countries, they are all passionately attached to their national independence. But if it became clear that we were withdrawing, their independence would stand as much chance of survival as Czechoslovakia’s did after Munich, and incidentally the dividend in goodwill from Stalin would be as insubstantial as that paid by Hitler after Munich…

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